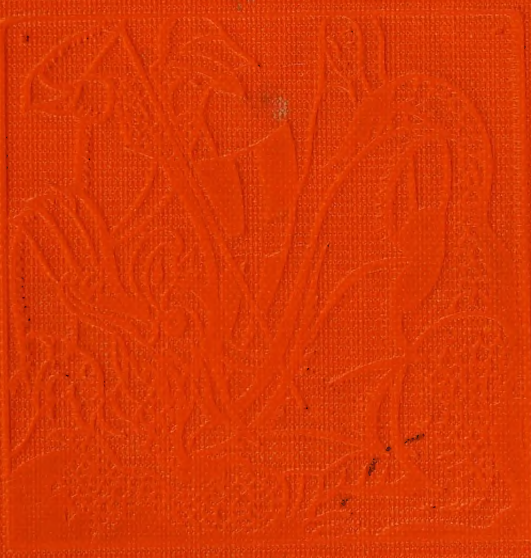
THE TAPESTRY ADVENTURE



BRENDA GIFFIN

Vera E. Muggeridge

From
Uncle Jess &
Auntie Nellie

Xmas 1930.

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"IT'S GONE," HE SAID

(*See page 94.*)

THE TAPESTRY ADVENTURE

By BRENDA GIRVIN

ILLUSTRATED BY H. R. MILLAR

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

ADVENTURE DAWNS

ANYONE standing at the gate of the little white house in Devonshire where Stephanie Carlyon lived with her widowed mother would have felt sure that no adventure could come in through the door over which the honeysuckle and the rose twisted together contentedly. Neither did Stephanie herself suggest adventure, for she was a shy, dainty-looking girl, with soft blue eyes, and a retiring manner. In fact, the only thing at all unusual about her was that her hair was not bobbed, but that she wore it in two pigtails.

No matter how quietly one lives, however, adventure will find one out if it is destined to come that way. And adventure was close beside Stephanie.

She liked to try and sketch, and it was while she was in Mrs. Fowler's meadow drawing the back of the old farmhouse, with its thatched roof caught in a blaze of setting sun, that adventure first came to her.

She sang to herself as she worked, for she had a happy disposition, and was so much absorbed in her drawing that she did not hear someone come up behind her.

"Not so bad for a wee lassie."

She turned, and saw a tall man with an iron-grey moustache and humorous brown eyes looking down at her. Then he took her pencil and corrected the pathway, and put a touch to the chimney, and indicated a shadow that she had not seen.

He stood back and surveyed the drawing.

"Oh, it does look different now," said Stephanie, and she felt ashamed of her own work. "Mine was dreadfully bad."

This pleased the Scotsman greatly. He laughed and patted Stephanie on the shoulder.

"Ay," he said, "you'll be good one day, because you know you're bad."

Then he asked her name and where she lived.

She told him.

He was so friendly that she said at last:

"I wonder if you would tell me yours."

"David MacRory," he answered.

Stephanie nearly jumped off her stool in excitement.

"What?" she said. "David MacRory, the great painter?"

"So you've heard of me. There is still more hope for you!"

And he laughed so much at this joke that Stephanie laughed too. She was soon talking to him as though she had known him for years. She told him that they were poor, and sometimes they had to take in paying guests. Finally, that the only really nice thing they possessed was a piece of old tapestry. Great-Aunt Emily had left it to her mother, because it was called "Stephanie's Knight-Errant."

Mr. MacRory did not pay much attention to the story of the tapestry; he was more interested in Stephanie's talent. He told her he would like to speak to her mother. Thus it was that Mrs. Carlyon, standing in the doorway of Honeysuckle Cottage a little while later, saw a very excited Stephanie coming home accompanied by a tall stranger.

"So you're her mother," he said, when Stephanie had made the introduction. "Send the lass away, and I'll tell you what I think of her."

Sitting in the drawing-room under the tapestry, he told Mrs. Carlyon that he had been impressed by the promise that her daughter had shown in her sketches. Mrs. Carlyon, who had never suspected that Stephanie had any real artistic talent, could not help feeling very pleased. He advised her mother to send her to London, so that she might have every advantage that a sound training would give her.

While Mr. MacRory was there it sounded so attractive,

"IT DOES LOOK DIFFERENT NOW," SAID STEPHANIE

but when he was gone it seemed so hopeless. It would cost at least two hundred pounds a year to send Stephanie to London, and Mrs. Carlyon's tiny pension only amounted to a hundred and twenty pounds a year.

Mrs. Carlyon, feeling depressed, looked up at the lovely piece of needlework, depicting a knight saving the fair lady Stephanie from the peril of a dragon, that was Aunt Emily's bequest. In her will Great-Aunt Emily had written: "The needlework is worth a great deal of money. Don't be sentimental about it, but sell it if the necessity arises, particularly should it be for Stephanie's welfare."

Mrs. Carlyon told Stephanie what she meant to do. She would sell the tapestry, and the money obtained from it would be spent on giving Stephanie a first-class education in art. But alas, disappointment followed on disappointment! She advertised the tapestry. One or two people came to see it, but merely out of interest, for it was a Gobelin Tapestry of great reputation.

One day Mrs. Carlyon advertised the tapestry in the *Times* as being for sale. The following afternoon she and Stephanie sat in the garden waiting for the post. There might be an answer to the advertisement, for Mrs. Carlyon was as great a dreamer as Stephanie herself.

"If someone buys it," she said, "we'll let this cottage and take a little flat in London, and you shall go to an art school every day."

"Won't I work and work!" said Stephanie. "And perhaps one day," she added, and she slipped her hand into her mother's, for they were more like friends than mother and daughter, "it won't be a small flat we shall live in but a big house, and you will have heaps of money and everything you want, and I shall give it you. Oh, Mummie, Mummie—if someone only buys the tapestry and I have my chance, I will do well—I will."

Stephanie's eyes were bright, her cheeks were pink with eagerness to succeed. Then they saw the postman, old bent Miles. He did seem a long time coming down the road.

"Isn't it funny," said Stephanie to her mother, "to think what Miles may be bringing us? Something that may make all the difference to our lives."

She ran to the gate to meet him.

Yes, there was one letter for Mrs. Carlyon. The postmark was Pebbletown.

But it was not an answer to the advertisement. It was a letter from a Miss Green, who understood that Mrs. Carlyon sometimes took paying guests in her pretty cottage. She would like to come there if she might. She had been recommended by Mrs. Carlyon's old friend, the Vicar of Pebbletown.

Of course they were disappointed. Still, another post might bring them better luck. And then, if they sold the tapestry, they would not have to take Miss Green.

"There's Mrs. Bennett and Lancelot," said Stephanie suddenly.

Then she laughed, but checked herself.

"No, it's too unkind to laugh at him," she said. "He didn't name himself, and I'm sorry for him. If ever there was less of a knight in the world, it's poor little Lance. Perhaps it's his mother's fault," she went on, "because he hasn't a perfectly adorable Mummie as I have. She mollycoddles him so."

"And his father goes to the other extreme," said Mrs. Carlyon. "He is so strict with him that the boy is terrified even to speak before him."

But they could not discuss Lancelot any more, for the gate had been pushed open, and Mrs. Bennett, very floppy in draperies, with Lancelot, a little pale-faced shrimp of a boy, had come into the garden.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

STEPHANIE'S KNIGHT

STEPHANIE had the dearest and kindest heart in the world. For this reason she was particularly nice to Lancelot. He, lonely, odd little boy that he was, adored her. Stephanie, however, had no idea of his devotion for her. To him she was the most wonderful person, and when Mrs. Bennett had said she was going to see Mrs. Carlyon, Lancelot had asked her to take him with her. Although Mrs. Bennett had murmured that perhaps the walk would be too much for him, as the sun was so hot, and that he had better rest in the shade of the garden, Lancelot had entreated so hard that at last she had given way, provided he wore his Panama hat and kept it tilted over his eyes, and walked there quietly, and did not run and jump over the gates on the way.

"A thing he's not likely to do," answered his father, who had come into the room at the moment. "I'd be glad to see him try."

"But he might bruise himself," said Mrs. Bennett.

"A few bruises would do him good," Mr. Bennett added brusquely, for his son's weakness of character irritated him.

This had upset Mrs. Bennett. She had begun to weep a little, and had put her arm round Lancelot, as though to draw him to her, and protect him from such a hard-hearted father.

When Lancelot had shaken hands with Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie, he sat down close to his mother.

Immediately she began to fuss about him.

Was the sun in his eyes?

Why didn't he lean against the seat so that his back wouldn't get tired?

Stephanie felt sorry for him. It was miserable having somebody always worrying about you like this. She asked

him if he would not like to go into the orchard and pick apples with her.

Lancelot was delighted. The last thing he heard was Mrs. Bennett calling after him that he must not eat any apples in case they should not be ripe, he must only look at them. When they reached the orchard they did not pick apples. They just stood under the tree. Stephanie tried to make conversation, but she found it very difficult.

Lancelot said little but "Yes" or "No" to any question she asked him. He stood gazing at her through his big round spectacles. He looked a funny little object, in his tweed suit that was too big for him. It had been bought two years before to allow for him to grow, but unfortunately he had not grown. Although he was twelve years old he did not look a day more than nine. Stephanie wondered what he was thinking about. She never had known anyone before with whom it was so hard to make friends.

She would have been surprised if she could have known that he was thinking about her. He was imagining that he was rescuing her from a fire. She was so nice that he wanted to do things for her. Nobody else was so kind to him as she was. Other people would have left him sitting on the seat beside his mother.

Oh dear! Stephanie could not think of anything else to talk about. She had asked him all these questions: What lessons he liked best? What was his favourite place for a holiday? If he kept rabbits? Then she thought of the tapestry.

"Have you seen the tapestry that Great-Aunt Emily left Mother?" she enquired.

"No," said Lancelot.

"Would you like to see it?"

"Yes," said Lancelot.

"I'll show it you."

"Thank you," said Lancelot.

So she took him into the drawing-room, where the tapestry had been hung across the wall by means of two chains suspended from the ceiling.

The two children stood in front of the needlework.

"You see," said Stephanie, pointing it out, "that's the knight on the horse. And there's the dragon. And that's the Ladye Stephanie—there—behind him, leaning against the tree. She was attacked by the dragon, and the brave knight has ridden out to save her. Oh, he is so glad to have the chance of doing something brave to help her, because that is what brave knights always want to do—something to help their fair ladies."

"That's what Father says I never am," said Lancelot with a deep sigh.

"What?"

"Brave."

Then, having volunteered this one piece of information, he lapsed into such a long silence, not even now saying "Yes" or "No," that Stephanie again began to wonder what he could be thinking about.

She never would have guessed the nice little thought that had come into his mind. He wished he could do something to help her. Something real. Not something imaginary. He would like to be her brave knight. He was still standing looking at the tapestry, and Stephanie was still standing looking at him, when Mrs. Carlyon and Mrs. Bennett also came in to see it.

"Of course I don't know much about old needlework, but I'm sure it's very lovely," said Mrs. Bennett. "And exceedingly valuable."

"Yes," said Mrs. Carlyon. "The trouble is that so few have money nowadays to spend on art treasures."

At this moment there came a ring at the front door, and Stephanie went to answer it. She came back into the room a moment later.

"Mummie," she said, "there's somebody wants to see you. He says he's an insurance agent."

Mrs. Carlyon excused herself for a moment. When she came back she explained what the agent had wanted.

While the tapestry had been in the possession of her

aunt, it had been insured. He wanted to know if she wished to continue the insurance.

"Will you, Mummie?" Stephanie asked.

"I suppose I'd better," Mrs. Carlyon answered. Then she begged Mrs. Bennett to excuse her while she went to a side table to write a cheque. As she put her signature to the cheque, she said:

"Do you know what? I almost wish that somebody would come and steal the tapestry."

Then, because Mrs. Bennett looked bewildered, she explained the position.

"You see, it's really worth many hundreds of pounds, but I cannot get anyone to buy it, and I want the money so much, because if I had it I should be able to give Stephanie an art education, and it would make all the difference to her future."

Still Lancelot said nothing. He was not dreaming now. He was listening. Although from his looks one would have considered him to be a slow-witted child, his mind worked quickly. If someone was to steal the tapestry, it would make all the difference to Stephanie. She would have the money for an art education.

He had often thought that burglars were very brave people. One would need to be very brave to break into someone's house in the dark and eerie night. Lancelot shivered to think of it.

Mrs. Carlyon had written the cheque, and Mrs. Bennett was laughing foolishly.

"You'll have to ask someone to steal it," she said.

"Yes. I'd be quite safe now that the premium is paid," laughed Mrs. Carlyon as she went out of the room.

All the conversation that had taken place in the drawing-room had been overheard by the agent standing in the hall. He was a dour, disagreeable man, without any sense of humour, but with a great sense of his own importance. This was so marked that at the office he was always known as Mr. Watts, not familiarly as Watts.

As he went down the pathway and closed the gate behind him, he thought: "I wonder how often insurance firms are defrauded. That house, for instance. If that tapestry were suddenly to be stolen, I should be pretty certain in my mind that the theft was nothing but a put-up job."

The call on Mrs. Carlyon had been his last for the day. Mr. Watts lived at Midbury, a town about twelve miles away, which he reached by motor-cycle.

By the time he had reached his house he was quite certain that he was on the track of a fraud, and that it would not be very long before Mrs. Carlyon would secrete the tapestry and put in a claim for the insurance money, making believe that it had been stolen.

He told his wife what he suspected. She just smiled indulgently and said:

"You're looking tired, Thomas. You'd better have a second cup of tea."

This made him indignant.

"You don't believe me," he said.

She nodded her head knowingly, and answered:

"Ever since Henry Parr found out that the grocer at Pebbletown had set fire to his shop on purpose, and Parr got promotion, you've been crazy to find out a case of fraud. So you go imagining an innocent woman's going to hide a tapestry and make believe it's stolen, so as to get some hundreds of pounds which aren't her due. It isn't safe to go getting things in your head like that."

But the insurance agent only set his mouth more firmly.

"If I hear that tapestry gets stolen," he said, "I shall investigate the whole affair myself."

And his wife changed the conversation, for it seemed a subject on which they were likely to grow quarrelsome.

All the same, for the next few days she could not help asking him each night as he returned:

"Well, has the tapestry been stolen yet?"

Then a week later she was not able to ask him the

question any more. Caught in the rain coming home one evening, Mr. Watts got a bad chill.

The chill became worse, and after the end of a serious illness, during which he was too weak and frail to think of tapestries or business of any kind, the doctor ordered him to Switzerland, where he remained for three months in a sanatorium.

And thus it happened that by the time Mr. Watts returned to his office all the events that took place concerning the piece of tapestry had become stale history.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

LANCELOT IS BRAVE

On that afternoon when Lancelot had heard Mrs. Carlyon telling his mother that she wished somebody would steal "Stephanie's Knight-Errant" because it would make so much difference to Stephanie's future, he had thought of a plan. He too, like the agent, had no sense of humour, and it did not occur to him that Mrs. Carlyon had been joking. It was a daring scheme. It made his heart beat quickly to think of it. He would do it that very night. When the night came, and he lay awake in his bed, he realized what it meant. He would have to crawl out of that nice warm bed, slip out of this house, slip into that house over there. It would be all dark and the boards would creak. There would be shadows running after him. He would be all alone. He felt he could not do it.

So he put it off.

For four days he did nothing. But all the time he hated himself for being a coward. When his father called him "Mousie" and weak-spirited, he hung his head and felt ashamed, because he knew that it was true.

On the following afternoon he met Stephanie in the village. She had been to post some letters for Miss Green,

the paying guest, who had arrived to stay with them a day or two previously.

"Could I walk home with you?" he said.

Stephanie was rather amused at him. He was as uncommunicative as ever as they walked side by side along the road, she pretty and dainty in her blue gingham jumper and skirt, he as queer a little object as ever, even queerer, for Mrs. Bennett had made him put on thick green woollen stockings and white sand-shoes.

Every few seconds he yawned. At last his yawning got on Stephanie's nerves.

"Didn't you sleep last night," she said rather crossly, "that you're so very tired?"

"I haven't slept at all for the last four nights."

"Why ever not? What were you doing?"

"Thinking."

This nearly made Stephanie laugh. Judging from his lack of conversation, she thought, he might have found time to think during the day.

"I'm glad I didn't stay awake last night." she said, "or I should have missed the most lovely dream."

"What did you dream?" asked Lancelot.

"I dreamt I'd got what I want more than anything. I suppose my dreams all got mixed up with the tapestry and what I wanted. I dreamt I was in a hall full of knights, and they were all calling out: 'Set us a task, set us a task!' And I said: 'The task I set you is to find me a purse of gold, so that I can be trained to be an artist.' All the knights went away. Then one rode back and threw the purse of gold at my feet. He was such a brave knight. He had encountered all sorts of dangers to get it for me."

"What was he like?" asked Lancelot.

"I don't know," said Stephanie. "I mean, you don't see people in dreams sometimes, they slip away and are round the corner before you realize them."

Then she gave a little sigh.

"Oh, I was disappointed when I woke up and found it

was a dream—that there wasn't really any brave knight ready to help me, to give me my chance of winning my way to fame."

They were by the gate now.

Lancelot drew himself up. He clenched his hands. He said to himself: "I will, I will, I will."

And to Stephanie he said:

"I wish I had been the knight to find you the purse of gold."

She was so touched, because he spoke with such sincerity, that she exclaimed:

"You're a dear to have thought of it. I shouldn't be surprised if, after all, you didn't turn out to be quite brave."

Then she went into the house, and he went back home.

Lancelot had made up his mind. Yes, he really had. It was her words: "I believe you're really quite brave after all," that decided him. He had never felt decided before. It was a nice feeling. When he got into bed and the light was out it did not feel quite such a nice feeling. She had said he could be brave. He was going to be brave, and carry out his plan, no matter how much his knees trembled and how dry his tongue felt. And she would not know who that knight had been, any more than she knew who the knight of her dreams had been, until one day many, many years hence. Oh, it was a lovely romantic story that he planned. He would creep to her house. He would take the tapestry and hide it. They would think it had been stolen, Mrs. Carlyon would get the insurance money, and Stephanie could have her training. One day, when she was a famous artist, he and Stephanie would be having tea together, and she would say to him: "Wasn't it wonderful how I got my chance?" And he would say to her: "It was I who gave it you." He would tell her all about the night when he had determined to be brave.

He grew so much excited over this story that he was out of bed and in his coat and knickers before he realized that he had dressed.

He almost enjoyed creeping down the stairs. It was not a bit difficult opening the dining-room door, unlatching the French window, and slipping out into the garden. He did not think of the shadows and the bushes as he turned out into the road. Then he ran and ran and ran along the road to Stephanie's home.

It was lovely being brave. Stephanie was right when she had once told him that you had only to make up your mind to be a thing, and you could be it.

He felt as courageous now as the "tapestry" knight who had slain the dragon.

When he reached the gate of Stephanie's home he hesitated for the first time, but it was a doubt of how to act more than any fear of cowardice that overtook him.

He had swung back the gate and walked up the garden path. He was standing in front of Stephanie's house. How was he going to get inside it? The doors and windows would be all barred and bolted. He had not thought of that. Oh dear, it was hard to have been brave and then to be thwarted like this!

He would have to go home. He turned, and began to hurry back along the road. Then he stopped. Was he glad that he had been thwarted? Was he not hurrying back feeling relieved?

He was very honest with himself. He was glad. He was relieved. Then he had no business to be glad. This was not being brave, and overcoming obstacles. Brave knights were not daunted by a few bars and bolts.

He turned back to the cottage, and once again swung back the white gate. He walked up the flagged path. How quiet the little house looked! That was Stephanie's room, the one in the middle, with the lattice window. He wondered if she was dreaming of her brave knight.

Would that brave knight have sawn through the bolts with his sword, he wondered? He had no sword.

He looked towards the front door, wondering if he would ever be able to open it. To his surprise he saw that it was

open already. Moreover, a stone had been set against it to hold it ajar, so that there should be no risk of its slamming. Lancelot was surprised. People do not usually go to bed and leave the front door propped open. He felt almost disappointed. This had so reduced his difficulties. It was such an easy way to get into the house.

It would be no use trying to break in through a window, however, when the open front door was inviting him to walk through it. Dear, dear! It seemed as though everything had been left ready for him, as though he were expected. Just inside the door was a lantern and a box of matches. This was very useful to him, for he had not thought of bringing a light of any kind, and the corridor was dark. He lighted the candle, and holding the lantern low, crept along to the drawing-room. Here again preparations had been made for him.

The drawing-room door stood open, and just like the front door, it had been propped open to prevent its slamming.

A high chair had been placed under the tapestry. Lancelot scrambled up on to it.

Although the tapestry was so valuable, it was a small piece of needlework, and Lancelot was able to remove it from the wall without any difficulty. He knelt down on the floor and rolled it up. Then he crept towards the front door. He put back the lantern where he had found it, and left the door ajar as it had been when he came into the house.

He was half way along the paved pathway when he stopped. He had heard the gate at the bottom of the garden being opened and closed again.

He forgot that he was a brave knight. He felt a frightened little boy. He plunged into the rhododendron bushes, and crawled among them, his face pressed against the ground, afraid to look to the right or left of him, afraid to move, lest a twig should crack or a leaf should rustle. Then he heard no more. He waited a long while. He began to wonder if he had really heard the gate click. Perhaps it had only swung to and fro in the wind. He began to feel

sure that there had not been anyone, but all the same he felt he would be glad to be safely home in bed again.

He crept out from among the rhododendron bushes, slipped down the pathway, and began to run along the road; but he could not run so fast this time, because he had to carry the tapestry. He was almost home when he had an unfortunate encounter.

At the bend of the road he collided with old Nicholas Dyer. He was a shop-keeper with none too sober habits, and it was his liking for tippling that kept him abroad so late at night. Lancelot pulled up short. He turned hot and cold. The old shop-keeper shook his head at him, and spoke in his fuddled way.

"Yes, I know who you are," he said. "You're Master Lancelot Bennett—out after apples, are you—out after apples? There—there. And why shouldn't you be out after apples? What are apples for if they're not to be eaten? I'm not the one to tell on a boy who's after apples. I was fond of apples myself when I was as young as you."

The old man went on mumbling down the road about apples and boys and his past youth.

Lancelot heaved a sigh of relief. It was a fortunate thing that he had collided with Mr. Dyer and with nobody else. The old man had been too mixed-up to notice the parcel he was carrying.

He returned to the house as he had left it, through the dining-room window, latching it carefully behind him.

He reached his bedroom in safety. Then he stood looking at the roll under his arm.

What was he going to do with it?

Nobody must know that he had taken it, or Mrs. Carlyon would not get the insurance money, then Stephanie would not have her training, and all his knight-errantry would have been in vain. He was so tired now that he began to think of really stupid places to hide it. In his bed—in his cupboard? And when they went dusting they'd find it.

He pulled himself together.

He had done so well up to the present, he must not fail now. So much depended on finding a good hiding-place for the tapestry. It must be put somewhere where no one would ever come across it. Somewhere in the middle of his room there was a creaking board. He had often noticed it when he had happened to walk over it. He began to jump about on the carpet, to locate it. Yes, there it was. In the middle, under a big caterpillar rose. He lifted the chairs off the carpet. He pushed back the washstand where a leg stood on it. Then he rolled back the carpet.

He found the loose board. There was a poker in the grate. He fetched it. He wedged the poker into the crack. He pressed on it. At last he managed to lift the board, and with a good deal of squeezing and shoving he was able at length to push the roll of tapestry into the cavity beneath.

Then he put down the board again, jumped on it to make it as firm as he could, and finally replaced the carpet.

Now he crept into bed, thoroughly tired. He had no sleepless night this time. The moment his head touched the pillow he fell asleep, feeling really happy and contented in the knowledge that he had been brave at last.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE INSURANCE MONEY

On the morning following her knight's visit to her home, Stephanie wakened very early. She could not sleep again. She lay turning over this way and that way. It was almost as though she were conscious that something might have happened in the house.

At last she decided to go downstairs and fetch the book she had left on the dining-room mantelpiece.

When Lancelot crept out of the house the previous night, he had left the door wide open as it had been standing when he arrived. He had also put back the lantern.

Now the lantern was gone, and the door was shut. Had Lancelot come down the stairs, he might have been surprised to see that this was so. But to Stephanie it was, of course, just as it should be, seeing that she herself had locked the front door before they had gone to bed the previous evening. Directly she got into the dining-room she did see something which surprised her. The window was open at the bottom. She was quite sure that the window had been closed, because she remembered that while she had been locking the front door her mother had come in to bolt it.

She hurried over to examine it.

Oh, someone must have broken into the cottage! One hasp had been wrenched right off, and all over the painted sill were newly made scratches.

She looked quickly round the room. What had they taken? She thought of the silver bowl on the table. That was there.

The silver inkstand on the bureau?

That was also there.

The old china in the corner cabinet?

It had not been touched.

Perhaps they had gone to the pantry for the spoons and forks.

She knew that was the place where burglars nearly always went first. She hurried to the pantry. It did not look as though anyone had been in there. The place was in perfect order. She unbolted the cupboard. The silver basket was on the shelf, and everything was in it.

They were the funniest burglars. What could they have taken?

Then she thought of the most valuable thing they had in the house, the tapestry. She hurried into the drawing-room. The wall on which the tapestry had hung was empty. She stood looking at it. Then she laughed almost gleefully.

As she stood laughing, someone came into the room behind her. She started and turned.

It was Miss Green, their paying guest recommended by the vicar of Pebbletown. And Miss Green said:

"Oh, so it was you moving about down here! I heard somebody, and I was afraid there might be burglars in the house."

Stephanie laughed again, and said: "If you wanted to catch the burglars you ought to have been down hours ago."

She pointed to the wall.

Before Miss Green had time to exclaim or say anything, somebody else who had been attracted by the sounds came into the room. This was Ellen. She said almost the same thing that Miss Green had said:

"I heard sounds, and I thought it might be burglars. But there, it's only you, Miss Stephanie, and Miss Green. I'm sure I'm very relieved."

Miss Green, however, paid no attention to what Ellen was saying. She was looking at the wall to which Stephanie had pointed.

"Where has it gone?" she said.

Ellen looked at the wall.

"The tapestry isn't there," she said.

And again Stephanie laughed joyfully.

"There have been burglars here," she said. "They got in through the dining-room window, because the latch is broken, and there are scratches on the paint."

"Scratches on the paint!" said Miss Green. "Dear, dear, how distressing their having made scratches."

And Miss Green seemed to be much more worried over the scratches on the paint than she was over the loss of the tapestry.

It was Ellen who went back to that matter.

"What will your mother say, Miss, when she hears?"

"She'll be glad," said Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon came into the room at that moment.

"What are you all doing here?" she said.

"Mummie," said Stephanie, "the tapestry's been stolen."

Mrs. Carlyon looked at Stephanie. Then she smiled.

"No—no," she said. "I know quite well you're having a joke at my expense."

"It's no joke," said Stephanie. "It's absolutely true."

"But why should you think it a joke?" Miss Green inquired.

"Well, it seems so extraordinary it should have happened," Mrs. Carlyon replied. "Stephanie and I have so often joked about it, and said we wished somebody would steal it as we would rather have the money."

"But it's gone now," said Stephanie. "Really and truly gone."

When Mrs. Carlyon realized that the needlework had indeed been stolen she began to set to work to investigate the matter. She examined the broken window in the dining-room, and decided that the burglar had obviously entered that way. She even noticed something that neither Stephanie, nor Miss Green nor Ellen, who were also making close investigations now, had observed. The greenery under the window had been trampled on. And Miss Green said: "How silly of him not to have pulled it up again!"

Stephanie thought Miss Green even more foolish than ever. How could a burglar mend broken twigs?

He had been smart enough as it was. He had not left so much as the sign of a footprint.

Mrs. Carlyon said everything was to be left as it was until the police had seen it.

It was about nine o'clock when the police came. They summoned everyone in the house and asked questions.

Nobody had heard any noise. The dining-room was at the side of the house, and that was the reason no doubt why the burglar had broken in that way.

Never had there been a more obvious case of burglary. All that remained now was to see if it were possible to track the burglar.

Nothing could be heard of him.

Although all the curiosity shops were scoured, and pas-

sengers going abroad were searched, not a trace was discovered of the missing "Ladye Stephanie" Tapestry.

When some weeks had elapsed, and it looked as though the missing piece of needlework were never to be found again, the insurance company, satisfied that everything was in order, paid the money. On the day Mrs. Carlyon received the cheque, Miss Green's brother came to visit her. Miss Green told Mrs. Carlyon that he was very clever at investments. Mr. Green advised her to put her money in the Western Oil Field, because it was paying a good dividend. Indeed he was kinder still. He offered to take her money and invest it for her.

Stephanie was to go to London to school and study art seriously, because Mrs. Carlyon decided that it would be wrong not to give her every chance when such a wonderful authority as Mr. MacRory had found her so talented.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

STEPHANIE'S SCHOOL

All the plans for Stephanie's education were made. Mrs. Carlyon went to see her sister who lived in London. They talked everything over together. Eventually it was decided that Stephanie should go to the same school as her cousin Molly, in South Kensington, for at this school great attention was paid to art.

Aunt Mary would not hear of Stephanie's living with anyone but herself. She and Molly would love to have her with them. Indeed, Aunt Mary felt almost as delighted as Mrs. Carlyon to hear of the wonderful talent that so great an authority as Mr. MacRory had found in her niece.

Mrs. Carlyon and Aunt Mary went to interview Miss Webster, the school principal. She too was interested to hear of the promise Stephanie showed, and assured

Mrs. Carlyon that she should have every advantage that could be given her.

So Stephanie went to live in London, to take up her career. She felt rather shy arriving at school the first morning, but the girls were very nice to her, all except one who eyed her jealously.

This was Viola Branch. She was jealous because of Mr. MacRory's praise, which Molly, feeling very proud of her cousin, repeated word for word.

During the previous Christmas holidays Viola had been staying with her uncle, who had a beautiful home in Scotland. She imagined herself to be something of an artist. While she was with her uncle, Mr. MacRory, who had been an old schoolfellow of his, had come to stay. Viola was a *poseuse*. She very much wanted to have Mr. MacRory's opinion of her work, which she never doubted would be a favourable one. Accordingly after tea one day she had laid all her drawings out on a table in the drawing-room. Knowing that Mr. MacRory was sure to come into the room, she had waited for him there, standing in a mock artistic pose, with her chestnut bobbed head on one side and her finger held to her pointed chin.

Mr. MacRory could not bear anything that was not natural, and Viola's airs and graces had already got on his nerves. If she had turned round as he came into the room and said: "Will you tell me what you think of these?" he would have given her a candid, but a kind, opinion.

She must start, however, and pretend that she did not know he was there, and then begin to cover up her work.

"I'd never have put all these out," she said, "if I'd thought you would see them."

"There isn't any need for me to do so," Mr. MacRory answered, "since you've covered them up."

This answer did not suit Viola, who had planned for him to see them, so she might get his praise.

"Since you have discovered that I paint," she said, "what

do you think of that?" She took up a seascape of which she thought a great deal herself.

Her conceit was unbearable, and her work was atrocious. Mr. MacRory told her so.

"I'd do needlework," he said, "if I were you, and not waste any time on painting."

With this he had marched out of the room, leaving Viola furious.

So when she heard that Molly's cousin was coming to school, and that Mr. MacRory had praised her work, she was not inclined to make overtures of friendliness towards her.

Stephanie had a lovable disposition, and was so unaffected and sincere that she soon became popular with both girls and mistresses. Although her education had been limited, she had been very well grounded, and her reading with her mother had given her a wider understanding of literature than was usual in a girl of her age. It was not long before she reached the top of her form, and Miss Webster and the mistresses who taught her began to take a real interest in her work, and to speak among themselves of the promise she showed. Undoubtedly she was unusually clever.

Viola was clever too, and until Stephanie had come into the form she had usually been head of it. Thus, when the mid-term exams. were over, and the girls, gathering round the board to see the result, shouted out that Stephanie's name was first, Viola felt very angry indeed. She was so much upset that she was rude to Stephanie. The girls took Stephanie's part.

"You're jealous," said Cora Dean, who had always disliked Viola. "That's what's the matter with you. You're jealous."

Stephanie felt pleased with her success at school, so far as her lessons went. There was one thing that distressed her. She did not seem to make the progress in her drawing that she hoped, and she had a feeling that Miss Marshall, who taught her, was not really satisfied. But it must be

all right, she must have talent, because Mr. MacRory himself had said so, and it was a well-known fact that Mr. MacRory never gave praise unless it was really due.

Miss Marshall did not say anything, but this same thought troubled her.

One day towards the end of the term, Viola, when she was half-way home, remembered that she had left her pencil in the studio.

The studio was a big room, and sitting at the further end of it, hidden behind a canvas, were Miss Marshall and Miss Adams, the junior drawing mistress. They did not hear Viola come into the studio. They were looking through some sketches. Their first sentence caught Viola's attention. She stopped and listened.

"This is Stephanie's work for the term. Doesn't it make you realize," Miss Marshall was saying, "how wonderfully clever Mr. MacRory is, what a wonderful intuition he must have, for I must confess if I had seen Stephanie's work I should never have seen the promise in it that he did? It's average and normal, but there must be something behind it that he sees and we don't."

"Perhaps we're impatient," said Miss Adams, "and it will develop in a term or two."

"I feel confident it will, if he said so."

"—If he said so," Viola repeated to herself. She took up her pencil and slipped out of the studio. "If he said so." She had never thought of that. Supposing he had never said so? Stephanie was quite capable of making it up. It certainly looked as though she had done so, since neither Miss Marshall nor Miss Adams could see any more in her work than in Viola's.

Next morning Viola met Stephanie on her way to school. The first thing she did was to repeat Miss Marshall's words to her.

"It is funny, isn't it," she said, "that you shouldn't show more promise after what Mr. MacRory said about you?" Then she added: "If he did."

Stephanie was usually very even tempered, but Viola was often rude to her, and she was goaded into a show of temper.

"You're trying to make out," she said, "that I invented it, that he never said such a thing. But I tell you he did. It's very unfair of you to try and make out I am not speaking the truth. As if I should make up a thing like that."

Public opinion can be changed very subtly. Up to the present all the girls had been fond of Stephanie, and she had been happy in their friendship. Viola set to work to undermine her popularity.

A girl called Hilda Brown came rushing to Stephanie one day, and said: "Miss Webster's engaged."

To Stephanie this meant only one thing. Miss Webster was going to be married. And if she were going to be married, she would leave. Stephanie was very fond of Miss Webster, and it really distressed her to think that she might be leaving. She told some of the others. The story spread round the school, until it reached Miss Webster's ears. She put an end to it. The story was traced back to Stephanie, who said she had got it from Hilda. Hilda was scornful; she had not meant engaged to be married. She had meant that she was engaged for the moment—in other words, that she was talking to a parent. She accused Stephanie of having deliberately twisted her words in order to make a good story.

Viola got to work.

"That's just what I've noticed in Stephanie," she said. "She'll twist anything to make a good story. Look at the stories she's told us of things that have happened to her. Do you really believe the tapestry that was stolen from her house was worth all she said it was? Do you really believe that Mr. MacRory praised her work as she said he did? I'm really beginning to doubt it. And I know Miss Marshall and Miss Adams are doubtful too. Don't you suppose she'd be ever so much better than anyone else in the class if he had really said all she says he did?"

They were talking on the corner of the tennis lawn. The group round Viola grew larger and larger. Heads began to nod. Yes, it was strange certainly that she did not draw better. She had been at school two terms now. She ought to have begun to get on. Suspicion began to grow. Public opinion began to turn against Stephanie. Then Sheila MacDonald, who was a fair-minded girl, made a practical suggestion. This was the summer term. At the end of the summer term the big exams. were held. As well as the ordinary school exams. there was a special one for art. A prize had been bequeathed to the school. The subject was announced on the day of the examination, and the best picture drawn to depict the subject was awarded the prize. If Mr. MacRory really had praised Stephanie, then she ought to do well, and come out top.

The girls agreed that this was very just. They would suspend judgment as to the accuracy of Stephanie's story until the examination took place. All the same, their manner towards Stephanie changed. She noticed it. When she arrived in the morning they did not gather round so eagerly. Their good-mornings were cool.

Needless to say, Viola did not fail to report to her what they thought about her work.

The day of the examination came nearer. Aunt Mary was quite worried about Stephanie. She looked pale and hollow-eyed. Stephanie was distracted about herself. She must do well. She *must* come out top—in the art class, anyhow. She did not care about anything else, so long as she did well with her drawing. It was so unfair, so unjust of them not to believe that Mr. MacRory had commended her work. He had said every word Molly had told them.

The other exams. were over. The art examination was the last to take place.

Poor Stephanie had been awake from early morning. The art class was a large one, and about forty girls were taking part in the competition. The subject was announced. The prize was to be given for the best drawing of a thatched

cottage. Here indeed was Stephanie's chance, since it was for a drawing of a similar subject that Mr. MacRory had praised her.

Oh dear, what was the matter with her? She could not get the cottage right. She could not even get it as well as she had drawn it on that memorable morning. Three times she tore up the sketch she had made, and did another. She grew more and more disheartened. When she handed in the sketch she had little hope that it would be a winner.

A week later the school assembled in the great hall, and Miss Webster announced the examination results. The Sixth Form and the Fifth Form results were read out first. Then came the results of the Upper Fourth.

This was how Stephanie stood in the list:

Literature	1st.
French	1st.
History	1st.
Arithmetic	2nd.
Latin	1st.
Euclid	3rd.

She had come out top in four of the subjects, and had not fallen below third in any of them.

The school was clapping, Miss Webster was saying nice things about her, but it all passed over her head. The one thing she wanted to know was where she stood in the art competition. On this her honour depended.

It was the last list to be read out. She was not top.

Winifred Barnes's name was read first. Name after name was read. Hers had not come yet. Had it been omitted by mistake? It came at last, next but one to the bottom. She felt so ashamed, so miserable, that she slipped out of the great hall, put on her hat and coat, and was back at the flat before any of the girls had been able to speak to her.

"It seems a funny thing," said Aunt Mary, when Stephanie told her the results of the examinations, "that you have done so brilliantly in everything except in the one thing in

which you're supposed to excel. But there, I've often heard of that before. People who do least well in a subject at school turn out best in it afterwards. And maybe you felt nervous."

"I did," said Stephanie, "terribly nervous. I don't think I ever felt so nervous about anything before."

Aunt Mary saw at once in this the solution.

"Of course that explains everything," she said, trying to comfort her distressed niece. "You were so nervous you couldn't do your best. I've heard it said many a time that exams. are no true test at all. It isn't a matter of ability who comes out top. It's a matter of temperament."

To her surprise, Stephanie, who was usually a most self-controlled girl, burst into a flood of tears. She flung herself on to a sofa in the corner of the room, and sobbed and sobbed. Then Molly came rushing in.

"What's wrong with Stephanie?" asked her mother.

"It's the girls. They're horrible," said Molly indignantly. "It's all Viola's doing. I knew it had been going on for some while, but I hoped perhaps Stephanie didn't know about it, because she never said a word to me. They—they——" Molly stormed indignantly, "won't believe Mr. MacRory ever praised her drawing."

"It looks so dreadfully like it," sobbed Stephanie; "that's the trouble. Molly telling them the wonderful things I told her he said, and then my doing worse than anyone in the art exam. Oh, I wish—I wish," said Stephanie, "Mr. MacRory would come to the school, then I'd be able to make him tell the girls that what I said was true."

Then Aunt Mary had an idea.

"Why don't you write to him, dear, and ask him to put it in writing? You can tell him all about your difficulties. I am sure he will understand."

But Stephanie was not easily to be comforted.

"I don't know his address," she said.

Molly was never overcome by obstacles.

"You can't lose a big man like Mr. MacRory," she said.

"That's the best of being well known, you can't hide yourself."

She fetched a copy of *Who's Who* off the shelf, and, turning up the M's, she found MacRory's name in it. His address was: 15, Dunedin Terrace, Edinburgh.

So Stephanie went to her bedroom, and when she was alone, wrote to Mr. MacRory. That night for the first time for weeks she slept happily. Next morning in the cloak room, when the girls were looking at her more doubtfully than ever, she held her head high, and told them what she had done.

"You'll have to believe me," she said, "when he writes."

"*When*," sniffed Viola, who was afraid that the girls were beginning to waver towards Stephanie again, for Sheila was saying:

"Fancy your writing and asking him to put it down on paper!"

"You don't believe he will write?" said Stephanie, turning on Viola.

"No. No more than I believe you've written," said Viola. "Oh, it's easy enough to say you've written, and no doubt your imaginative brain will invent some very good reason why he doesn't answer."

Now the girls were veering round to Viola's side again.

"Yes," said Kathleen, "we'll believe you when we see his letter."

Oh, how Stephanie longed for that answer! She was at the letter-box before the postman came in the morning. When she returned to the flat each day from school the first thing she did was to rush to the hall table to see if there was a letter for her.

Mr. MacRory did not write.

And every morning when she got to school the girls said, "Well, where's the letter?"

And every day she had to answer: "It hasn't come yet."

But she did not give any reason why it had not come, although Molly's fertile brain invented several. He had so many letters to answer. He had told his secretary to write

to Stephanie, and she had not done so. All these she rushed on the girls in the cloak room, making herself almost as unpopular as Stephanie by her loyal championship of her cousin. When they asked her if she had seen the letter written, alack, she could not say yes, for Stephanie had gone up to write it quietly in her room, and had herself gone out to post it.

Then the last day of the term came. The girls did not ask her if she had received the letter. They took it for granted that she had not.

The following day her aunt and cousin saw Stephanie off to Devonshire. Molly went flying down the platform to buy her a copy of the *Daily Mirror* to read on the journey. Stephanie did not open it at once. She was thinking over the past term. She had been so much excited when the tapestry had been stolen and the insurance money had enabled her to go to school. It had all been very disappointing. She had been much happier before David MacRory had come into the village and pointed out her unknown talent. She was not making much of that talent either.

Could it have been that he was mistaken? No, not Mr. MacRory, not a great artist like that. Anyhow, it was extraordinary that he had not written. She opened the *Daily Mirror* and the first thing that caught her attention was Mr. MacRory's name. He had gone to Central Africa to execute a special commission.

She was relieved. That was why he had not written. Even Viola could not say she had fudged up this excuse. When he came back he would find her letter waiting for him, and she felt sure he would write to her at once.

When the train steamed into the station, and she saw her mother waiting for her on the platform, it was quite a smiling Stephanie who sprang out of the train, and flung her arms about her mother's neck, and told her it was just gorgeous to be back again in Devonshire.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH
THE NEXT ADVENTURE

WHILE Stephanie was at Aunt Mary's, the girls and the Art Competition had seemed to stand out and blot everything else from her mind, but before she reached the cottage the remembrance of school seemed to have slipped away, and other interests to have taken its place.

There was so much to hear about the poultry, her puppy, the new rose trees. She had never been away from home before, so she had never realized how exciting coming back would be. There was only one thing that brought back school to her mind for a moment.

When she got to the gate she saw a little figure standing there. And it shows how soon one forgets a thing, since Stephanie had almost forgotten how odd Lancelot was. Or did he look odder than usual this afternoon?

He was wearing white flannel trousers too long for him, which he had tied round his ankles with two pieces of scarlet ribbon from a chocolate box. He had bicycled over, and had been obliged to fasten them up to keep them out of his way. His cap was too small, and his coat was too big.

When Stephanie got out of the taxi, he rushed at her.

"How d'you do—How d'you do?" And he kept on muttering "How d'you do—How d'you do?" to himself after he had finished speaking it.

Then he jerked out: "Hope you got on well at school."

Before she had time to answer he had sprung on his bicycle and was off again.

Mrs. Carlyon leant against the gate and laughed. Stephanie, although the question had brought back unpleasant thoughts to her mind, was soon laughing too.

"He really is the oddest little boy," said Mrs. Carlyon as they walked up the path. "He's been over here nearly every day since you went away. I don't think he has ever

said more than: 'I hope she's getting on all right'—and then vanished. I think it is just a little pathetic that he takes such an enormous interest in your welfare. The parental air he adopts when he looks over those big glasses of his might almost suggest he was responsible for sending you to school."

Miss Green was out for tea, so Stephanie had it alone with her mother.

She could not help feeling glad, for although she knew it was necessary for them to have Miss Green, she never could like her.

It was after tea, while they were sitting in the cool blue chintz drawing-room, that Mrs. Carlyon told Stephanie something.

"I've something I want to tell you, Stephanie. I did not write to you about it at school, because I was afraid of disturbing you. I am very glad, however, to have you home, because it's been worrying me a great deal."

And these were the opening words of Stephanie's next adventure, the one that was to carry her right through the holidays and to push the remembrance of school completely out of her mind.

Mrs. Carlyon got up and went to her bureau.

"Is it a money worry?" said Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon shook her head.

"Perhaps it's silly of me to worry about it at all. I don't suppose there's anything in it. I know one should never pay any attention to anonymous communications."

She took out a post-card and handed it to Stephanie. Printed on it was this jingle:

"In your house
A thief has been.
Look for a name
To rhyme with preen."

"I suppose that means," said Stephanie, "that the thief's name rhymes with 'preen.'"

She began to go through the alphabet.

"Breen—— No, there isn't such a name. Frean—— It might be Frean." Then she stopped.

"Green—— Mummie—Miss Green." She laughed. "No, of course it could not be Miss Green. Can you imagine Miss Green having anything to do with the burglary? No, I think it's Frean we have to look for. If we find some one called Frean, we find the burglar."

Then Mrs. Carlyon brought out another post-card.

"You haven't found the thief, alas.
Think of the colour of the grass."

"Green—that's the colour of the grass," Stephanie said promptly. "Green. It does look as though we were meant to think it was Miss Green."

"That's exactly what I thought," said Mrs. Carlyon. "Somebody who wants to shift the blame off himself is trying to make us believe that poor, innocent Miss Green stole the tapestry."

Just as at school the girls had begun to grow suspicious of Mr. MacRory's praise of Stephanie once Viola had put the idea into their heads, so Stephanie found herself growing suspicious of Miss Green.

At supper her eyes strayed towards her. It was absurd. She had come with such good recommendations from her mother's old friend, Canon Weston. But then Canon Weston, everybody knew, was so generous and kind-hearted that anyone could take him in. It was always said of him that he thought the greatest rogues the most perfect saints. Then Stephanie was cross with herself. Did Miss Green really look as though she were a thief? She sat there, very stiffly upholstered in a red merino dress, looking greedily at the raspberries and cream on her plate, and correcting Stephanie quite severely when she said:

"I do love raspberries, don't you?"

"My dear, you should not love anything that is food."

All the same, Stephanie could not help remembering things. It was Miss Green who had been the first person

after herself to come down that morning. But that was easily explained. It was possible Miss Green might have heard her movements and come down to see what she was doing.

Now that Mrs. Carlyon had shown Stephanie the post-cards, her mind seemed to be at ease. She sat down to write letters at her bureau, while Miss Green went on making the little white petticoat she was employed upon for a forthcoming bazaar.

Stephanie went out into the garden, and stood under the drawing-room window. If a burglar had forced his way in through the window, it was odd that no footprints had been left. That rather suggested that someone in the house might have committed the theft. The bushes under the open window had already been searched for clues. This evening Stephanie looked among them again. It was a long while before she found anything. And then she came across a hairpin. It was a smaller one than most people use, and it had two kinks in it. Although it was rusted from exposure, you could see that it was silver in colour. Miss Green's hair was white. She used silver-coloured hair-pins with two kinks in them. Stephanie, feeling really excited, began to examine the points of the hairpin. There was a tiny scrap of brown paint on one of them. Stephanie thought of the scratches on the window-ledge. It was dreadful how she was really beginning to believe that Miss Green had taken the tapestry.

She turned to go indoors. Miss Green was standing on the path behind her. She nearly screamed, she was so startled. Perhaps it was foolish of Stephanie to say:

"This is one of your hairpins. I found it in the bushes. Funny place to find a hairpin in the middle of the bushes. And there's paint on it," for if Miss Green had been guilty, she would have known at once that she was suspected.

But then when one is surprised as Stephanie had been one is not always as careful as one might be in the choice of words.

Miss Green did not seem at all disconcerted, as she answered:

"Yes. I can see exactly how that hairpin came there. Your mother lost her bodkin one day, and I gave her a hairpin to use to thread her ribbon. She was sewing up in her bedroom. I suppose it fell out into the bushes."

Stephanie did not believe that story. She was sure she would find out her mother never had lost her bodkin.

She left Miss Green in the garden, and went back to the drawing-room.

"Mummie," said Stephanie, interrupting her mother in the middle of a letter, so eager was she to know. "Did you ever borrow a hairpin from Miss Green?"

"I'm sure I don't remember," said Mrs. Carlyon.

"Oh, but you must remember," Stephanie urged. "It's most important, because I've found one in the bushes. And she says you did, and if you didn't it makes her look dreadfully guilty. She says it was one day when you hadn't got a bodkin."

"So I did," said Mrs. Carlyon. "Now you mention the bodkin I remember. It was in my bedroom. I tried a hairpin of my own, and it was too big to get through the beading. So she went to her room and fetched me one of hers."

Stephanie felt disappointed, and a little crushed. How easy it was to suspect people and imagine evidence against them!

Mrs. Carlyon laughed at her.

"No, no," she said. "You mustn't go suspecting poor old Miss Green. Perhaps I oughtn't to have shown you the post-cards. More than likely there's nothing at all in them, and if there is, it's only someone who has a grudge against her, and, as I said before, is trying to make us suspect her."

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

MR. AND MISS GREEN

Mrs. Carlyon had guessed at the truth. There was somebody who had a grudge against Miss Green. That lady did not know it, however, and was unaware of the postcards Mrs. Carlyon had received.

Miss Green lingered in the garden, wondering what could have made Stephanie suspicious that she had anything to do with the theft of the tapestry. Although she had not allowed Stephanie to know it, she had been aware from her manner that she was suspicious of her. Certainly Miss Green had come to Mrs. Carlyon through references supplied by Canon Weston. They were genuine references, for Miss Green was one of the rogues whom poor old Canon Weston looked upon as saints.

To quite understand Miss Green's position, we must go back to the night of the burglary, even to the few weeks that preceded it.

Miss Green's name was not Green at all. It was Gibbons.

She and her brother had for many years been connected with some of the cleverest robberies that had taken place, but they were so skilful that they had never yet been detected. For some months they had been living in a little cottage in Canon Weston's parish. While they were there they had seen Aunt Emily's will in the paper, and had noticed that her valuable tapestry had been bequeathed to her niece, Delia Carlyon, of Combe, Devon. They had barely read about the tapestry, when the old Canon called to take a cup of tea with them.

He too had read of the will in the paper, and although they never mentioned that they had seen it, he spoke of it.

"And I'm quite sure," he said, "that money would have been of more use to the poor thing than a piece of needlework, for I have just had a letter from her asking if I know

of anyone who would like to go as a paying guest, in her home in Devonshire."

Not long after this Miss Green arrived at the Vicarage. She needed a change. She would like to go to Devonshire.

The old Canon was delighted. He loved helping people. He was quite excited at the thought of writing to Mrs. Carlyon to tell her he had found her a nice paying guest.

The brother and sister planned that when Miss Green had been at Combe for a fortnight the theft of the tapestry was to take place. She was to leave the door open for him, and make all necessary arrangements from the inside. He would take away the tapestry and hide it in a safe place. Three days after the burglary had taken place, he would come down to visit her, for there would be nothing more natural than that he should come to see his sister while taking a motor tour through the West of England.

The visit had been one of apparent surprise to Miss Green. It had occurred on an afternoon when Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie were out. So that, beyond the fact they knew Miss Green's brother had come, they never guessed at the surprising thing that had come to light during that visit.

He had been shown into the drawing-room. Miss Green had taken the precaution to ask Ellen to run across the road with a letter. Then she had closed the door. She wanted to be sure there was no one within hearing.

"Did you get it away safely?" she whispered. "And have you sold it?"

Her brother looked at her in surprise.

"It was gone when I came," he said.

Miss Green could scarcely believe him.

"But the front door was open," she said, "and the lantern was beside it."

"Yes," he said, "the front door was open, and the lantern beside it. But when I came in here for the tapestry, I found someone had been before me, and it had been ripped off the wall."

"Who could it have been?" said Miss Green. "Whoever could it have been?"

"Perhaps," said Mr. Green, "it was the owner of the pink stud." He produced out of his pocket a bright pink stud, which he had picked up in the hall on the night of the burglary.

They talked and puzzled for a long while. Miss Green thought the pink stud might well be a clue. They planned that Miss Green should remain at Honeysuckle Cottage, so that she might be at hand to gain the latest information.

Then Ellen came in with the tea, and Miss Green hastily changed the conversation. She was full of enquiries as to whether her brother had made a good trip, and if he had been lucky enough to avoid any punctures.

When he had gone she sat looking at the pink stud, and wondering who would have taken the tapestry.

She could think of no satisfactory solution. She certainly did not suspect the queer little boy who took such an interest in the choice of Stephanie's new school, and who, when she had gone to London, still came to the house to enquire how she was getting on.

Her brother, however, had his suspicions. They had only come to him after he had left the cottage. He thought the thief was his sister. The more he thought of it, the more sure he was. Once before he had caught her out in a similar piece of meanness.

She had opened a drawer for him to take out of it a diamond brooch. But she had slipped in and taken it first. He had found her out, however, before she had disposed of it.

When he showed her the pink stud, how ready she had been to agree that the thief was the owner of the pink stud.

Perhaps it was a good thing he had not thought of it before, or his temper might have got the better of him, and hot words have followed that Ellen would have heard.

Yes. That was what she had done, tricked him again, as she had tried to trick him over the diamond brooch. She

was not willing to share the money with him. She wanted to have it all for herself. Very well, then. He would see that she was found out. He would put people round her on her track. But he would do it so cleverly that it would never come to light that it was he who had done it.

He was furious over the trick he believed she had played him.

Miss Green, of course, had not the least idea that her brother had started the suspicion against her, although she was quite sure, as she paced the garden on the night of Stephanie's return from school, that suspicions had been aroused. She knew it was a dangerous thing when people begin to be suspicious, because, even though in this case she was not actually guilty of the theft, she had no wish to encourage investigations in which, perhaps, some of her past history might be brought to light.

She stood thinking down by the garden gate. When one is suspected of something, the best way to get rid of that suspicion is to direct it against someone else. But against whom?

She stood pondering. No, she could not fix upon any one person at the moment. But by the next afternoon she had made her decision. The person was put into her hands.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

CASTING SUSPICIONS

On that same night—the night Stephanie returned home from school—Mr. Watts, the insurance agent, who had been to Combe to arrange about the insurance of the tapestry, and who had unfortunately overheard Mrs. Carlyon's jocular remark in the drawing-room, came back cured from Switzerland.

He was so full of health now, that he was more eager than ever to get on in his work. In his little home he talked

that night to his wife of the days when they would not live in a little house like that. He meant to get on. He meant to prove he was really valuable to the company, if only he had his chance. It was not until the supper things were cleared away and he was sitting by the open window smoking his pipe, and Mrs. Watts was darning his socks, that she remembered to tell him something that would interest him.

"Just before you were ill," she said, "do you recollect going to insure a piece of tapestry at Combe?"

"Very well indeed," said Mr. Watts. "I had the idea that we'd hear that tapestry was stolen. And you mark my words, one day we shall hear it yet."

"It was stolen," she said.

"What!" he exclaimed, almost jumping off his seat with excitement.

"It happened, I think it was a week or two after you'd been taken ill. Anyhow, I cut the piece out of the paper because I thought you'd be interested."

She went to the drawer to find it. It had been such a long time ago now that it had got under other papers.

She was so long finding it that Mr. Watts grew irritable.

"Where have you put it? Where have you put it?"

"Oh, don't fluster me," said Mrs. Watts. "I'll find it all the quicker if you let me be. You go and sit down in your chair, and I'll bring it to you when I've found it."

He had barely sat down again when she came across the cutting.

"Here it is," she said. "You see I had kept it all right."

She stood quietly while he read it. It was just a short paragraph which told how the "Ladye Stephanie" Tapestry, that had recently come into the possession of Mrs. Carlyon, of Combe, had been stolen by a thief who had broken into the house by the dining-room window.

"And I suppose she got the insurance money," said Mr. Watts when he had finished reading.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I don't know anything more of it than that."

"Well, I say," said Mr. Watts, banging on the table with his fist, "that she was paid the money. And I say further that she sent her daughter to a first-class school with that money."

"Well, I'm sure anyhow if she did it was very good of her," Mrs. Watts retorted. "It isn't as though she spent it on herself."

"That's nothing to do with it," said Mr. Watts. "It's getting money to which you aren't entitled. And it's a pretty bad thing that. Our law deals hardly with anyone who fudges the insurance."

"You're not going to tell on the poor lady," said Mrs. Watts, who did not stop to think that her husband was just guessing, and that he had no evidence at all against Mrs. Carlyon.

"I'm going to do my duty by my company," said Mr. Watts obstinately. "I'm going to find out first if she got the money. Second, if she sent the child to school with the money. And if these two things are proved, then I'm going to set to work to make further investigations."

Mrs. Watts was almost tearful.

"Well, I'm sure you'll treat the poor lady kindly and remember she did it all for a good purpose."

Mr. Watts went to the office next morning, hugging his secret to himself.

"Hullo, Mr. Watts, back again? Feeling better?" said the manager. That was all. He did not say he had missed him, or that the office had been a lost place without him.

No matter; they would learn to value him soon. They'd soon know they had got a man here who was worth his weight in gold to the company.

He had an opportunity during the morning of inspecting the ledgers. He found out that the insurance money had been duly paid to Mrs. Carlyon.

There were some clients to be visited at Combe Upton, a

village about two miles from Combe—the tenants of a couple of cottages who had not renewed their policies. The job had been given to Burton, but Burton did not want to go, for it would mean that he would get home late, and he had promised to play cricket. Mr. Watts offered to go for him. Burton looked at Watts. The latter was not a favourite in the office, and as a rule he was not given to helping other people. But perhaps his illness had improved him.

"I'm sure I'm much obliged, and it's very good of you," said Burton as he left the office.

When the business was done, Mr. Watts did not turn back to Midbury, but went on to Combe. He wanted to find out if Stephanie had gone to school.

It was a glorious summer evening; the sunlight twinkled through the trees, and a soft breeze rustled the hedges. But Mr. Watts did not think of the evening. He wondered if they would make him a director of the company. He was picturing the praise he would receive. He was so deep in his thoughts that he almost ran down a boy and girl who were hurrying along the road, side by side, with tennis racquets.

The boy was an odd-looking little fellow, the girl had a pigtail and a blue cotton dress. He had seen them before. He remembered now. That day, at Mrs. Carlyon's. The girl was her daughter. Here was his chance of finding out if she had gone to school. He jumped off his bicycle.

"Excuse me," he said, "for almost running into you. I was thinking, and didn't ring my bell."

"Oh, that's all right," said Stephanie. She would have gone walking on and paid no more attention to the cyclist, if he had not stopped her by his next remark.

"You're Miss Carlyon, aren't you? Forgive me, but I can't help feeling particularly interested in you and your family. You see, I was the insurance agent who came down to insure your tapestry just before it was stolen."

"And she went to school," interrupted Lancelot eagerly, "out of the money."

Mr. Watts had gathered the information he wanted. But he did not ride on yet.

"I suppose," he continued, "it was its being stolen so soon after I'd insured it that makes it particularly interesting to me. I wonder if you'd allow me to see"—he was still speaking to Stephanie—"the wall on which it hung, and the window through which the burglars entered."

"I'm sure Mummie wouldn't mind," said Stephanie, "especially as we're very grateful to you, because if you hadn't insured it we should not have got the money, and we wanted the money a lot more than we wanted the tapestry. I'm going to tennis now, or I would have taken you back and shown you myself, but if you go up to the cottage Mummie's in, and she won't mind you asking her a bit."

But Mrs. Carlyon was not in. As soon as Lancelot had called for Stephanie to take her to the Vicarage for tennis, Mrs. Carlyon had gone over to a farm near by to get some cream for supper, as a surprise for Stephanie. Ellen was out too. It was her afternoon off. So there was only Miss Green in the house.

To Miss Green Mr. Watts repeated Stephanie's permission to see the room and the window.

"I was the agent who insured the tapestry."

"Oh, I quite understand," said Miss Green. And she felt easier in her mind. She had not liked a strange man coming as it were to make investigations. But the agent who insured the picture——Of course he did not count.

So it was merely to make conversation that Miss Green remarked as they stood looking at the blank wall on which the tapestry had once hung:

"I suppose you haven't any idea who stole the needlework?"

The agent's answer made her jump.

"I have a very good idea who did it."

Miss Green was afraid that he meant herself. She clung to her idea. When one is suspected the best thing to do is

to fix the blame on somebody else. Perhaps it was the force of suggestion—for of course the agent had Mrs. Carlyon in his mind—but the idea of fixing the blame on Mrs. Carlyon came straight into Miss Green's head.

"Yes, I too have an idea who did it," said Miss Green, speaking carefully. "But even though one is paying money, and is not a guest, it doesn't seem always quite right to say all one knows about someone under the same roof."

The agent jumped at Miss Green's words.

"Then you think the same as I do," he said, "that it was Mrs. Carlyon?"

Miss Green could almost have screamed with relief. For some reason or other he was suspecting Mrs. Carlyon.

"Won't you sit down?" she said.

Needless to say, Mr. Watts was only too pleased to do so. He felt that he was indeed getting upon the scent.

He sat on a sofa, and Miss Green sat in an easy chair.

"It's been on my mind for some time," she said, "it's been troubling me so much that I could not sleep. And I would not have mentioned it to you even, if you had not mentioned it to me first. I should not have dreamt of letting Mrs. Carlyon's name pass my lips, if you had not been the one to speak of it. I wonder now if I might tell you things?"

She did not wait for Mr. Watts' assent, but went chattering on:

"You see, I felt sure that it must have been done from the inside of the house. Of course, this is only my own little theory, and I may be quite wrong, but we all know Mrs. Carlyon wanted money very badly to give Stephanie an art education—particularly from the moment Mr. MacRory spoke of her talent."

"Yes," said the agent. "I was waiting in the hall, and actually heard her say that, having insured the tapestry, she wished somebody would steal it so she could have the money. That's what put me on my guard."

"I've had a feeling all the time," said Miss Green, "that

the tapestry is really hidden in the house. You see, it's easy enough to break the hasp of a window from the inside."

Then Miss Green spoke very knowingly:

"Also to make scratches on the paint with a hairpin which has been borrowed from somebody else."

The agent pricked up his ears at the mention of the hairpin.

"What's that about a hairpin?"

"Shall I tell you, or shan't I? Perhaps I'd better not. Maybe I've said too much."

Miss Green was getting coy.

"I wish you'd tell me everything you think," said the agent.

"No—no," said Miss Green. "I'm frightened. I know I've said too much. And you'll tell Mrs. Carlyon I suspect her. And it'll all be so unpleasant."

Mr. Watts was ready to assure Miss Green that anything she might say to him, any help she might give him, should be treated with the utmost confidence.

And, if she should prefer it, when Mrs. Carlyon's roguery was explained to the authorities, he would never mention Miss Green's name, but take all the blame (which Mr. Watts interpreted in his own mind as credit) to himself. Thus no one would ever know that Miss Green had been involved in the story.

So Miss Green told Mr. Watts about the hairpin, and he was of the opinion that she had given him a valuable piece of evidence.

Mr. Watts was so sure of Mrs. Carlyon's guilt that Miss Green herself began to wonder whether that did not explain the disappearance of the tapestry. Certainly Mrs. Carlyon had benefited from the theft. If Mrs. Carlyon really had taken the tapestry, she could not do better than set Mr. Watts on to investigate further, for if he found where the needlework had gone, he would tell her, who was his confidante.

Who would have guessed, to see Miss Green sitting in the

chair with her hands folded primly on her knee, that such treacherous thoughts were going through her head?

"She may have hidden it in the house," she suggested.

Mr. Watts jumped at this idea.

"There is nobody at home but me. Even the maid is out," said Miss Green.

"Let's look for it," said Mr. Watts.

For an hour or more they searched. There were no locked cupboards, for Mrs. Carlyon trusted everyone. The only thing they found locked was a tiny dispatch-case, far too small to have held more than an inch or two of tapestry.

When at last they went back to the drawing-room, they decided that the needlework was not in the house.

"I suppose," said Mr. Watts, "that she's got rid of it by now. Kept it hidden for a bit—then disposed of it in London."

But Miss Green had a better suggestion to offer. She remembered the little pink stud that her brother had picked up in the hall.

"Do you know what I think?" she said. "I believe that Mrs. Carlyon had an accomplice. I think she gave the tapestry to someone who took it out of the house on the night of the burglary."

"What makes you think that?" asked Mr. Watts.

"Wait a minute," said Miss Green. She went upstairs, leaving the agent by himself in the drawing-room. He was thrilled with excitement.

He had been right. Here was his chance. He felt thankful he had not delayed, but come over straight away to investigate the case. He was all for himself. His wife was kind-hearted; he was not. He never thought of the struggling little woman trying to give her daughter a good education. He was puffed up with his own importance, eager only to gain promotion in the office.

Miss Green came back.

"There, do you see that?" she said. She was holding the pink stud out on the palm of her hand.

He took it up and looked at it.

"What of it?"

Then Miss Green told an untruth.

She could not say "My brother picked it up when he came here the night of the burglary," because, of course, as far as anyone knew, no brother of hers had been near the house that night. So she said:

"When I came down in the morning I found it. But I didn't tell anyone about it. It has occurred to me now that the owner of that pink stud came to the house, and that Mrs. Carlyon handed him the tapestry to take away and hide."

Mr. Watts was of the opinion that this was more than likely. Therefore his first move must be to find the owner of the pink stud.

Miss Green and Mr. Watts agreed that they would neither of them give Mrs. Carlyon the least idea that she was suspected, because it was much better to have complete evidence before any definite step was taken.

Mr. Watts got up to leave.

"I'm going to track down that pink stud," he said.

Miss Green looked up at him and blinked through her glasses.

"And I'm sure you'll find out," she said, "because you've been so wonderfully clever finding out so much already."

Mr. Watts swallowed her praise greedily. He did not stop to think that it was Miss Green who had practically put every idea in his head. Mr. Watts was so conceited, he always liked to think he did everything himself.

In this case it suited Miss Green very well to allow him to do so.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

MR. MACRORY AGAIN

STEPHANIE and Lancelot rode as far as the woods. They dismounted by a pool and sat for a moment on the bank looking into the water.

They had been more friendly during the last fortnight of those holidays than they had been in all the years they had known each other. It seemed as though Lancelot were coming out, and Stephanie found that when she got behind his gauche manner and queer personality he had many nice thoughts and ideas. His interest in her progress at school was really amazing. She was surprised at this, just as her mother had been.

Until this evening, when he had asked her how she was getting on with her drawing, she had always answered: "Quite well, thank you." But whether it was because the woods were so beautiful that night, or that she realized for the first time his queer devotion to her, or whether something had made her more communicative than usual, but Stephanie suddenly found herself telling him all her troubles. It was strange that she should have told him, since she had not even told her mother. But then, she did not want to worry her mother, and it would have worried her dreadfully if she had known that Stephanie was the least bit unhappy at school. It would have been unkind to make her miserable, considering she had not used one penny of the money herself, but had put it all aside for Stephanie's education.

"What I mind most of all," said Stephanie, "is that the girls should believe that I would ever have made up such a thing. Fancy my saying Mr. MacRory had said I could draw when he had not said anything of the kind!"

Lancelot grew quite fierce.

"I—I—wish all the girls were boys," he said. "Then I'd fight them."

"You're awfully loyal," said Stephanie gratefully. "I don't believe you'd ever doubt me."

"Never," said Lancelot firmly.

Stephanie felt she had never liked him so much before.

"But anyway," he said, and he really was quite comforting, "it'll be all right as soon as Mr. MacRory writes. Then they can't doubt you any more after you have his letter."

"I wish I could hear," sighed Stephanie, "before I go back to school next term. It is unlucky that he should be in Africa now, when I want him to be home so much."

They stayed in the woods until the sun began to sink. Then they decided that it was time for them to ride home again. They had only ridden about two miles along the main road, when Stephanie got a puncture. She jumped off her machine.

Lancelot dismounted too. He examined her tyre. It was only a thorn—just a tiny hole. It would not take him long to mend. So Stephanie sat on the bank while Lancelot took the tyre off the wheel.

A motor-car went past them, a two-seater. There was only one occupant, a man with a grey felt hat and an iron-grey moustache. It did not take Stephanie a minute to recognize him.

"Lancelot—Lancelot," she gasped. "It's Mr. MacRory. He must be home again. Oh, I wish we could have stopped him, then we could have asked him about the letter."

She looked after him. The two-seater had been drawn up at the signpost much further down the road.

"He's looking for the way. Quick, Lancelot. Jump on to your bicycle, and see if you can catch him up."

It did not take Lancelot a minute to spring on his bicycle. Here was something else he could do for Stephanie. There was nothing he loved so much as doing things for Stephanie.

Pedalling fast along the road, he was afraid that the motor-car might start off before he got there.

Oh, suppose MacRory was away before he had time to ask him!

The luck was with him. The owner of the motor-car had got out to read the rather worn lettering on the signpost, and while he was doing so the engine of his car had stopped. So he had to start it up again. He was just doing so as Lancelot, puffing and panting, reached the corner.

He rolled off his bicycle, and anyone hearing the words tumble out of his mouth as he spoke to MacRory would hardly have believed that he was the same boy who usually found it difficult to jerk out "Yes" or "No" when a stranger spoke to him.

"You're back from Africa. And Stephanie says could she please have an answer to her letter?"

No wonder Mr. MacRory looked up surprised at finding himself addressed unexpectedly like this by a small boy he did not remember having seen in his life before.

"P'raps you'd be more explicit, laddie," he said, smiling at the funny little soul.

Lancelot, now that he had regained his breath, put the matter more clearly.

"You saw Stephanie sketching a thatched cottage, and told her she had talent. And you went back to her mother's house and told her mother."

Now Mr. MacRory had a glimmer. He remembered the incident, but he could not connect Lancelot with the story.

But Lancelot supplied the information.

"I'm her friend—her great friend. Because you said she'd be great one day, they sent her to school."

"But I thought," said Mr. MacRory, "that her mother hadn't the means."

"They'd got a tapestry, and it got stolen—I mean somebody took it."

Mr. MacRory opened his eyes and looked at Lancelot. He let the correction go by for the moment.

"So they had the money to send her," Lancelot went on, pouring out the story of Stephanie's experiences at school, until he reached the point where she had written the letter

to Mr. MacRory to ask him to confirm his good opinion of her. "Then, seeing in the *Daily Mirror* you were in Africa," said Lancelot, "she thought that was why she hadn't got an answer. Then when you went past, she knew you were back again, and it seemed such a chance to ask you. But her bicycle was punctured, and she couldn't catch you up. That's why I've come. Did you get her letter?"

Mr. MacRory shook his head.

"I haven't had any letter from Stephanie."

"Oh, but she wrote it," said Lancelot.

"Where did she send it?"

"To the address her cousin Molly found for her in *Who's Who*. To 15, Dunedin Terrace, Edinburgh."

"I've not been there for a long while," said MacRory.

"Then that's why you haven't had her letter. I expect it's waiting there for you."

"Maybe it's waiting there," said MacRory. "What was there in it that she wanted me to answer?"

"She wanted you just to say the things you had said that the girls said you hadn't. Would you write her a letter, please?" said Lancelot. "It would make all the difference to her at school. It would make her ever so much happier."

"Oh, well—if it would make her all that happier, she can have the letter," said MacRory. "I'm staying at Ridgeway Farm"—he spoke of a farm-house about three miles distant —"and if you like to come with me now, I'll give it to you to take to her."

But Lancelot said he could not very well come then, because he had left Stephanie down the road with a punctured bicycle, and he would have to mend it for her and take her home. If Mr. MacRory would get it written, he would come over, if he might, and fetch it after supper.

"You shall have it after supper," said MacRory, "for I'm fond of girlies, and if they can't be happy at school, I don't know where they can be happy."

The engine of the car was buzzing again by now. MacRory nodded to Lancelot, and began to drive away.

Lancelot remounted his bicycle, and hurried back to Stephanie.

"It's all right," he said. "It was lucky I caught him up. He has not had your letter. He has not been to Edinburgh for a long time. But he's going to write it to-night, and I'm going to fetch it. He's staying at Ridgeway Farm."

"Oh, Lancelot, you're just too good to me," said Stephanie. "To ride up to a stranger like that, when I know how shy you are."

"I don't feel quite so shy as I used to," said Lancelot. "I believe I'm getting over it. And Mr. MacRory's so jolly nice that you couldn't feel shy with him. I felt he was the kind of man you could tell things to."

"That's what I felt," said Stephanie. "I did like him so much."

CHAPTER THE TENTH

LANCELOT TELLS THINGS

STEPHANIE was very anxious to ride over to Ridgeway Farm with Lancelot. Now that it was all coming straight she told her mother how the girls had doubted her.

Mrs. Carlyon was as vexed at first as Lancelot had been. However, she was so interested in the story of the chance meeting with Mr. MacRory that was going to make everyone happy again, that she was not nearly so distressed as she would have been if Stephanie had told her when she first came home from school. But she would not let Stephanie ride over to the farm. It was too late. It was all right Lancelot going. But Stephanie must stay at home.

Lancelot's father came out of the house just as Lancelot was mounting his bicycle.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"I'm going over to Ridgeway Farm," said Lancelot, "to get a letter for Stephanie."

"Quite a knight errant," sneered Mr. Bennett.

Then he was sorry he had spoken so harshly; he had noticed lately that Lancelot was not so cowardly as he had once been, that he seemed to be growing more manly. So he called him back, and said quite nicely:

"That's right. That's the right way to start in life. Always put yourself out to do something for a lady."

Lancelot was so delighted with his father's words of praise that his heart was very light as he pedalled down the lanes towards Ridgeway Farm.

What a strange thing it is, he thought, that when you've made up your mind to overcome cowardice it is so much easier the next time not to be a coward.

He seemed to have grown brave ever since the night he had taken the tapestry. Perhaps it was because it had been such a daring thing to do that everything else seemed mild in comparison.

Once he would have jumped at a rabbit running across the path in front of him, and screamed when a pheasant fluttered out of the bushes. He did not seem to notice these things now.

Ridgeway Farm was a pretty, low building. The sitting-room was set apart for lodgers, and overlooked the drive. The French windows leading to it were wide open, and Lancelot saw Mr. MacRory seated in an armchair smoking his after-dinner pipe.

Mr. MacRory caught sight of Lancelot, and he beckoned him to come in through the window.

"So you've come for your letter, laddie?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lancelot. "And Stephanie wants me to tell you how frightfully pleased she is that you'll write it."

"Well, there it is," said Mr. MacRory. He opened a blotter and took out a letter, which he had addressed to the "Lassies of Belmont School." "Do you think that'll do for these unbelieving girlies?"

He handed Lancelot the letter, in which he had written

down the words he had spoken to Stephanie that morning nearly seven months before.

He had finished it thus: "And in my opinion the young lady has a great future before her." He had signed it: "David MacRory."

When he gave Lancelot the letter, the boy prepared to go. Mr. MacRory, however, invited him to sit in the other chair, so that they could have a chat together.

"I've got something laddies like," he said.

He went to the cupboard and took out of it a tin of toffee. He put it down on the table beside Lancelot.

"Now just help yourself, and eat the lot of it if you've a mind."

He talked of many things. He told Lancelot stories of what he had done when he was a boy.

"And did you show promise of being a great artist very early?" Lancelot asked.

"Just about the same amount of promise as your friend, the Ladye Stephanie, does at the present moment," he said.

"I'll tell Stephanie that," said Lancelot. "She will be proud. And if you showed about the same amount of promise as she did, that means that one day she will be as great as you."

A little while later Lancelot made another attempt to go, but once again Mr. MacRory invited him to stay longer.

"You've not eaten all the toffees yet," he said. "Get on with them, laddie."

Then he said:

"After you left me, I was thinking of something you said at the cross roads. When you were telling me how the tapestry went that night, you said: 'It was stolen.' Then you corrected yourself. You said: 'I mean, somebody took it.' Why did you put it that way?"

He was looking closely at Lancelot.

"I mean," said Lancelot, "that somebody did take it."

"Well, stealing and taking it, isn't that the same thing?"

"No—no," put in Lancelot quickly.

Then it was that he felt more sure even than ever before that Mr. MacRory was the kind of person to whom you can tell things.

"It's a big secret," said Lancelot. His eyes grew as round as his spectacles. "And I've never told anyone about it before."

"Oh! A secret," said David MacRory, drawing up his chair. "There is nothing I like in the world so much as a secret. Suppose you were to tell me your secret. Ah! But there are still toffees in the tin. You go on eating toffees and telling me your secret."

"You won't tell anyone about it," said Lancelot, "if I tell you?"

"I'll promise you I'll not say a word to anyone."

"You see," said Lancelot, "I have a sort of feeling that you're the person who ought to know, because it was you who suggested she should go, and it was I who sent her. So we are both in it, as it were."

"I don't quite follow you, laddie." David MacRory found Lancelot at times very inexplicit.

"Well, if you hadn't told her mother she had talent, she'd never have wanted to send her to London. And if I hadn't taken the tapestry so they could get the money to send her, she never would have gone."

"Eh?" And he looked even harder now at Lancelot. "I think you'd better explain things still more clearly," he said.

So Lancelot told him that it was he who had taken the tapestry, and that no one had the least idea of it.

"And may I ask, young man, what you've done with it?"

"Put it under a board in my room," said Lancelot.

"Well, I never. Well, I never," said Mr. MacRory once again. "And it is still there?"

"Yes."

"Well, I——" Mr. MacRory began the same sentence for the third time. He stopped. He had said that before. He sat thinking. For a few moments he did not say anything, and Lancelot did not say anything.

When he next spoke, the note of surprise had died out of his voice.

"Do you know, young man, that you have committed a very serious offence?"

"I don't understand what you mean," said Lancelot.

Then Mr. MacRory explained very clearly what he did mean.

"Suppose now somebody were to find that piece of tapestry in your possession? What would they think? That you had stolen it."

"No," said Lancelot, "taken it."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't hold with the judge."

"What judge?" Lancelot was beginning to get frightened.

"Well, if that tapestry were found in your possession you would have to account for its being there. And a piece of tapestry taken from a house in the middle of the night —well—I am afraid it would look rather black against you."

Lancelot was beginning to see what the artist had in his mind. He had never thought of anybody supposing he had really stolen it. It might be difficult to explain away. Yes, it might. Lancelot was feeling distinctly frightened. Then he pulled himself together.

"No. No," he said. "It'll be all right. Quite all right. Because, you see, I could explain why I did it. That I took it so that Mrs. Carlyon could have the insurance money."

"I'm afraid you don't know very much about the ways of insurance offices," said Mr. MacRory. "They would consider they had been tricked. And it's a very serious offence—to defraud an insurance company. The directors would demand the money back."

Poor Lancelot was almost in a frenzy.

"Oh, I don't know what to do. I didn't realize I was doing any harm. I thought I was only helping Stephanie."

"Of course, you didn't mean any harm," said Mr. MacRory. "It was only just that you didn't understand what you were doing."

"And I'll take the tapestry back to Mrs. Carlyon. And I'll explain to her," poor Lancelot pattered on.

Now the artist was very kind indeed, so thoughtful for other people.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that would worry Mrs. Carlyon very much. She has already spent some of the money, and you see she would have to refund it. Of course she will have to know. Something must be arranged. But just at the moment"—Mr. MacRory was speaking quietly and thoughtfully—"I can't make up my mind which is the best thing to do."

He sat smoking his pipe. Poor Lancelot's knees were trembling. He was all jumpy—as he used to feel.

Then Mr. MacRory got up and put his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder.

"Suppose we decide to do nothing for a bit," he said. "I would like to think things over. I don't want to rush matters, and hurt poor Mrs. Carlyon, or hurt you either, because I know you thought you were acting for the best. Would you like to leave the matter with me?"

"I would—I would," said Lancelot.

"Very well, then," said Mr. MacRory. "You promise me you won't mention the matter to anyone till you hear from me again, and I'll see what can be done."

Lancelot thought he had a friend indeed in Mr. MacRory. He spoke with such assurance that the small boy felt confident that he would put matters all right.

When he was riding home through the growing dusk, fears crept back into his heart. Suppose they really believed he was a thief? And he thought he had been so brave. He wished he had never done it now.

Then he comforted himself once more. Mr. MacRory would put it all right. He had said he would. But anyhow he could not do anything, for he had promised the artist not to mention the matter, and to Lancelot a promise was a very sacred thing.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

THE PINK STUD

THE next day Miss Green happened by chance to meet Mr. Watts in a lane outside Combe.

He got off his bicycle when he saw her.

"Well," she said, "have you any information yet as to the person she handed the tapestry to? Have you found the owner of the pink stud?"

Mr. Watts shook his head. He had not had time to do much looking, because the manager had given him so many jobs. He had been thinking things over, and he felt a good deal troubled, because he did not see how it was possible ever to find someone who wore pink studs.

"I suppose," said Miss Green, looking demurely on the ground, and poking the dust with her long umbrella, "one way would be to find a shop that sold pink studs. And see if the owner could remember to whom he had sold any."

Mr. Watts was ready to allow that that might be one way of finding out, but it would take a lifetime to go round all the shops that sold pink studs. It might have been bought anywhere, that pink stud. It might have been bought anywhere certainly. Yes. Or it might have been bought in the village.

Now she came to think of it, she remembered seeing a card of pink collar studs in Mr. Dyer's funny little shop next door to the post office.

Mr. Watts was rather excited to hear this. He would be after those pink studs.

Miss Green no longer looked demurely on the ground. She lifted her eyes to Mr. Watts, and told him that it wanted a clever man like him to think of such a thing.

Mr. Watts hurried through his business. He was rather short with Mrs. Gregg, and consequently he lost her custom. She was not going to give her money to no one who came round and spoke to her like that. She would insure with

that nice-spoken gentleman who called from the Red Band Insurance Company, which was a rival business.

Mr. Dyer's shop was a messy little affair. Everything one can imagine was shoved into the window—sweets, hairpins, tapes, sausages. Mr. Watts stood looking at the litter. Then he saw the card that Miss Green had mentioned. It had been pushed to one side. There was no doubt about the colour of the studs. They were pink. A set of three studs was missing from it. Ah, if he could only find out who had bought those pink studs.

He went into the shop. Mr. Dyer's red-haired daughter was sitting behind the counter. Her hair was bright, but her wits were dull, and Mr. Watts found it very difficult to obtain any information from her.

"Yes, sir, we've got pink studs. Did you want some? They are sold by the set—three for 6½d."

"No, I don't want to buy any," Mr. Watts explained carefully. "I only want to know if you can remember who bought a set recently. I see one is missing from the card."

"Which card?" asked Miss Dyer.

"The one in the corner of the window," said Mr. Watts, trying his best to keep his patience.

Miss Dyer fetched the card out of the window. She laid it on the counter, and stood looking at it.

"They're nice and bright, aren't they?" she said.

"Yes. But that set——" The agent pointed at the blank space. "It would be of the greatest assistance to me if you can remember who bought that set."

Miss Dyer shook her head vaguely.

"There now. I don't remember. But I wouldn't remember, would I? because I never sold it."

"Who did sell it then?" asked Mr. Watts.

"I don't know. You see, I've been away in hospital for three months, and I only came back this morning."

He wondered why she could not have told him that straight away. But if he got angry with her he might not find out anything.

"But who was looking after the shop in your absence?"

"Father."

"Then perhaps Father sold the studs."

"Perhaps he did. You wouldn't wonder, would you, at anyone buying them when they're so bright?"

(Pink was her favourite colour.)

"But is Father at home?" he asked.

She expected so.

Could he see him?

She expected so.

Whether she would have made any effort to fetch Father was a doubtful point, but fortunately at this moment old Mr. Dyer came into the shop, and Miss Dyer gladly handed over her difficult customer.

"He wants to know who bought the pink studs that's gone off the card," she said. After this remark she retreated into the inner room.

Mr. Dyer was far more chattily inclined than his daughter.

"I wonder what you'd be wanting to know for?" he said.

"I'm afraid I can't give you full details yet," Mr. Watts answered importantly. "It's just a bit of detective work that I'm engaged upon."

Mr. Dyer was excited at the thought of taking a share in a mystery.

"I'm sure I don't want to ask any questions. But any help I can give I'm ready enough to do. There now, I wasn't in the shop when that set of studs was sold. No. I remember quite well it being sold. It was off the new card. It hadn't been in the window five minutes before a set was sold. It was my niece Elsie who sold it. She's from Cardiff. She was over here helping in the shop while Amelia was laid up."

This piece of information depressed Mr. Watts. He could not see how he could get all the way over to Cardiff to interview Elsie. But old Mr. Dyer's next observation put heart into him again.

"Now if you'd asked me who'd bought the last set off the last card, I'd have told you."

"Yes? Was that pink too?" said Mr. Watts.

"Yes. And it was sold on the same day as the other. That 's why I had to bring out the new card."

"Who bought that one?" asked the agent.

"The odd little gentleman. Mr. Bennett's little boy. I wonder if you've ever seen him about? The queerest little oddity."

Mr. Watts knew to whom old Dyer was referring—Stephanie's little friend, Lancelot. He had already seen him twice.

"He is odd," Mr. Dyer went rambling on. "Odd as they're made. It's not so long ago—maybe six months, time goes so quick—yes, it must be six months—there he was, would you believe it—close on midnight, walking along the road with a roll under his arm, just as though he was taking the carpet out for a walk."

Mr. Watts was all on the alert.

"I suppose," he said, "you can't remember which night that was?"

"Ay, I can. It was the night of the Farmers' Dinner."

"Do you remember the date of the Farmers' Dinner?"

"I don't remember out of my head," said Mr. Dyer, "but I've got the ticket. They sent me a ticket for the dinner, and I've kept it. I'll show it to you if you like."

Mr. Watts was eager to see it.

Mr. Dyer went into the inner room to fetch it.

While he was gone, the agent took out his note-book to make quite sure of the date on which the theft had taken place. He had jotted it down when he had copied it out of the register at the insurance office. July 18th.

Mr. Dyer came back with his ticket.

"There—there it is. And Amelia, she was asked too, but she couldn't go, being in hospital."

The date of the dinner was July 18th.

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Watts. He handed

back the card to Mr. Dyer, who was now beginning to roll off all the good things there had been to eat.

"There was beef and pork, mind you, and no stint either. You could have had both of them on your plate at once if you'd liked."

But Mr. Watts was eager to get out of the shop and think for himself.

He threw down a shilling on the counter.

"That's for your trouble," he said.

He went out from the shop, and turned along the lane that led in the direction of Lancelot's home.

It was quite clear now. Mrs. Carlyon had used Lancelot for her tool. He had bought the pink stud which he had dropped in the cottage. He had actually been seen by old Mr. Dyer with a roll under his arm. But, of course, it was not a carpet he had been carrying. It was the tapestry. The question now to be solved was this—where was the tapestry?

Mr. Watts stopped and leant against a gate. More than likely Lancelot had hidden it somewhere near his home. If he could find the tapestry, and tell Lancelot that he knew where he had hidden it, he might thus force the boy to confess his part in the proceedings. So he would be able to prove Mrs. Carlyon's fraud to the insurance company, and ensure his own promotion.

He had a feeling that he would like to visit Mr. Bennett's house. That was easy enough. All he had to do was to go and ask if the Star Company might not insure the premises.

He rang the front door bell.

Could he see Mr. Bennett?

Mr. Bennett was not at home.

Could he see Mrs. Bennett? He explained he was a representative of the Star Insurance Company. The maid showed him into the morning-room.

Mrs. Bennett was rather tired and headachey that morning. She came in, clutching Lancelot by the hand.

"My little boy is not very well," she said. "He's tired

and jumpy, so I did not let him go to school to-day. I was afraid he might be sickening for measles."

It was not the possibility of measles that was making Lancelot look limp and pale. He was terrified now about the tapestry hidden under his bedroom floor.

If it should be discovered before Mr. MacRory had decided what to do!

The agent then explained his business.

Poor Lancelot! When he heard he was connected with the Star Insurance Company he turned hot and cold. But there was nothing to be afraid of. He had only come on business.

Mrs. Bennett regretted that as they were already insured with the Red Band, she could not accept Mr. Watts' offer.

She rang the bell to have Mr. Watts shown out.

"There's the note to Rogers," said the maid when she came into the room. She was speaking to her mistress. "Do you think perhaps the gentleman would leave it for us if he's going into the town?"

Mrs. Bennett thought this was a good idea. She turned to Mr. Watts.

"If you'll be so kind as to leave the note. It's for Mr. Rogers, the carpenter," she said. "We want him to come up and mend my little boy's bedroom floor. Some of the boards seem to have got loose."

Poor Lancelot was terrified.

"No—no," he stammered and stuttered. "I don't want them mended. They aren't loose. I mean, if they are, I'm going to do them myself. I want to do them myself. I can do them with the new carpentering set Uncle sent me on my birthday."

Mr. Watts was watching Lancelot.

Why was he so very anxious that no carpenter should be asked to come in and mend those boards?

Mrs. Bennett was quieting Lancelot.

"There—there—if you want to mend them yourself, you

shall. With that nice little hammer and those nice little nails Uncle Harry sent you. So you needn't trouble, thank you, to take the note. My boy will mend the floor. Suppose you run up, darling, now, and set to work."

Lancelot was anxious to nail down those boards as quickly as he could. He did not wait to be told a second time. He hurried up to his bedroom.

Mr. Watts moved to leave. Mrs. Bennett stopped him.

"You see," she pointed with her finger upstairs, "he's delicate, and we have to humour him. I was just pretending I was going to let him do it himself. But, of course, the floor must be properly mended. I mean, I should never have a moment's rest if it was not. I should think all the time he was going to tumble through it. He's going out to tea this afternoon with his little friend, Stephanie Carlyon. If you would tell the carpenter to come at four o'clock, Lancelot need never know he's been."

Mr. Watts undertook to deliver Mrs. Bennett's message. But before he got to the town he met Miss Green.

To Miss Green he confided his discoveries of the morning. It certainly pointed to the boy.

"And oh," said Miss Green, "to think Mrs. Carlyon should have made a tool of a poor little fellow like that! I do wonder," she said, "if the tapestry's really hidden under the boards in his room?"

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

MORE WORRIES

Lancelot nailed down the floor. When he had finished he brought his mother into the room and made her jump on the boards.

"There," he said, "there isn't one of them now that rocks."

"No, darling," said Mrs. Bennett. "You're very clever."

Lancelot went off to tea with Stephanie, quite sure that he had prevented the visit of the carpenter.

He was usually very pleased to have tea with Stephanie, but that afternoon he almost wished he was not going to see her. He felt guilty. But, as he kept saying to himself, "the very worst that can happen is that I shall have to say why I took it. If I told, they couldn't think I was a thief. They couldn't."

It was a pity that he should not feel happy having tea with Stephanie, because he had something very nice to give her—Mr. MacRory's letter.

He did not expect to find Stephanie miserably unhappy as well. She did not come across the path to meet him as usual. So he peeped round the back of the cottage to see if she was in the orchard.

She was curled up in the hammock, looking dejected. When he came close up to her, he saw that she had been crying. He forgot that he had not wanted to go to tea with her. He only thought of making her happy again. He was glad he had Mr. MacRory's letter, because that would make her happy. But it did not.

"I shan't be able to show it to the girls at school now," she said, "because I'm not going back to school."

Lancelot couldn't think what she meant.

"It's come as a bomb-shell," said Stephanie, as he sat down beside her in the hammock. "I've been longing for you to come. But I wanted so badly to be miserable with someone. I've got to keep bright with Mummie, and pretend it doesn't really matter so much, because she feels so sad about it."

"But what has happened?" asked Lancelot.

"You remember when we had the money from the insurance company?"

"Yes," said Lancelot.

"Well, on the day the cheque came, Miss Green's brother was here to lunch. He told Mummie he knew of a very fine investment for her, and if she liked he'd take the money

and put it into Brazilian Oils, because she'd make ever so much more out of it than any other investment.

"Mummie doesn't know anything about business, or understand investments, so she said she'd be ever so pleased if he would arrange this for her, and thought it very kind of him.

"He's just been down to see Miss Green—at least we thought it was only Miss Green he wanted to see, but he wanted to see Mummie as well. When he came into the drawing-room to speak to her, she never guessed the bad news he was going to give her. The Brazilian Oils aren't any good. The wells have run dry. They failed suddenly."

Lancelot was indignant with Mr. Green.

"I don't think he ought to have put your money into a thing like that."

"Oh, but he didn't know," said Stephanie. "It wasn't really his fault. It isn't only our money that's been lost. It's all his own as well. And poor Miss Green's. And she can't afford to stay here any longer. She's got to go to London and get a job. He's got his little car here, and he's taking her away to-morrow morning. They're starting at ten. He says it'll be the last trip they'll ever do in that little car. He says they'll have to sell it now that they're so poor."

Something was troubling Lancelot. He had run the risk of being mistaken for a thief for nothing. The money he had got for Stephanie was lost.

As a rule when he went to the cottage to tea he would stay until the last moment, but that afternoon he left quite early. He was so unsettled and restless that Stephanie was not sorry to see him go.

On the way home a strange man passed him on a bicycle. He had a dark beard, and his cap was pulled down over his eyes. He had a carpenter's bag slung over his shoulders.

If Lancelot had known from whence he had come, his heart would have beat very quickly indeed. As a matter of fact he did not notice him. He did not even notice the

carpenter's bag. Had he done so, he still would not have been alarmed, for his father always employed Mr. Rogers, and Mr. Rogers was a chubby little man, whom he had known since he was a baby—not at all like this cyclist.

Mr. Rogers had not been able to go to Mrs. Bennett's that afternoon, so he had sent a hand. At least that was the story Mr. Watts had made up to the maid when she had opened the door to let him in, for, in order to find out whether the tapestry was under the boards in Lancelot's bedroom, he had disguised himself as a carpenter, and come to mend the floor.

He thought it a fine idea. It had not been his own. It had, however, been Miss Green's.

When he had met her before lunch, and told her of his suspicion and how he was taking a note to Mr. Rogers, and he was going to ask him to see if the tapestry was under those boards, she had suggested it would be very much better if he looked himself.

Then she laughed, and kept saying:

"What fun it would be!"

She laughed so much that she got on Mr. Watts' nerves. What a silly woman she was. He was not after fun. He was after serious business. How could he disguise himself as a carpenter? He had no make-up.

Miss Green was ready with more suggestions. She had a box of fancy dresses. Her brother was very clever at amateur theatricals. She would give him a beard and a cap. She believed she had a workman's suit. Her brother had once been a workman in a play of Shaw's.

She would put them in a bundle and hide them in a rhododendron inside the garden wall. Mr. Watts could fetch them while they were at lunch.

In that way Mr. Watts got his make-up.

The maid did not doubt his story that he came from Mr. Rogers. She showed him up to Lancelot's bedroom.

She rolled back the carpet, and he set to work to repair the floor.

The maid brought him a cup of tea.

"Getting on nicely, Mr.——?"

"Jones," he put in quickly.

He had taken the nails out. He lifted a board. He looked down. Yes, there it was, pushed away under the floor. Mrs. Carlyon's tapestry. He put down the boards again, and nailed them into position. He laid the carpet.

When Lancelot passed him on the road, he no more saw Lancelot than Lancelot saw him, for he was riding home full of his discovery, to tell his wife all about it.

"It won't be long now," he said, "before I can give you that fine house."

He was not so overbearing in his manner when he spoke to her. She was the one person of whom he was very fond indeed.

He scarcely slept that night, he was so eager to get to the office to tell the manager what he had discovered.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

SIR BERTRAM DANE

THE next afternoon Stephanie and Mrs. Carlyon were sitting together in the garden. They could see Miss Green moving about in her room. She had not left that morning, after all. There had been something wrong with the car, so the journey had been postponed until the following day.

Lancelot had been coming to spend the day with Stephanie. Miss Green had suggested this to Mrs. Carlyon. She said Stephanie looked miserable and depressed. She was sure it was about the money, and not being able to go back to school. And wouldn't it be nice for her if she had a friend for the day to brighten her up? Mrs. Carlyon could not help laughing at the idea of Lancelot brightening anybody up, but she knew that Stephanie was fond of him, so

she sent a note to Mrs. Bennett asking if she would spare Lancelot for the day.

But the answer came back that Lancelot was unfortunately in bed with a bilious attack, and unable to raise his head from the pillow.

It was shortly after this that Miss Green had gone down to see her brother, and come back with the news that the car could not start until the following day.

But the real reason for the postponement was Lancelot's illness.

This time Miss Green's brother had misjudged her, and when she had told him the previous afternoon that, through the efforts of the agent, she was almost certain where to find the tapestry, he realized he had been quite wrong in thinking that she had taken it, and was very glad he had made the postcards so non-committal that she had not known who had sent them.

As a matter of fact, had he but known it, it had occurred to her to make off with it herself. But she now decided it was better to tell him of its whereabouts, for it was easier for him to get it than for her, because of the difficulty of wrenching up the boards.

The agent had sent her a note which she received at supper-time. His suspicions were correct.

The tapestry was under the boards in Lancelot's bedroom.

Miss Green had gone down to see her brother at the inn after supper. She had taken the note to show him. They had planned to get Mrs. Carlyon to invite Lancelot to spend the day with Stephanie. Mr. Green was to go up after he had arrived to say that Lancelot wanted some stamps out of his stamp book. He had told him exactly where they were: might he go up to his bedroom and find them? If the maid stayed in the room with him, she must be sent away to get some paper and string. Then he would take up the board and slip out the tapestry. Mr. Green would carry his overcoat over his arm, so that he could hide the roll underneath it. All these carefully thought out

plans, however, had to be postponed for twenty-four hours, owing to Lancelot's unfortunate bilious attack.

The clock on the village church struck three. Stephanie glanced towards the gate.

"What are you looking at, darling?" said Mrs. Carlyon.

"I was just thinking," said Stephanie, "that this time yesterday something dreadful happened at three o'clock. I happened to notice that the clock was striking three as Mr. Green came through the gate, and brought the awful news about the money."

The words were barely out of Stephanie's mouth when the gate began to open, and an upright man with glasses, a stiff walk and a stiff manner, came through it.

"Whoever is he?" said Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon shook her head.

They watched him from the dining-room window, as he walked up the path towards the front door.

"I wish he hadn't come at three o'clock," Stephanie suddenly exclaimed.

"Silly little girl," said Mrs. Carlyon.

"I can't help it," said Stephanie. "It's after yesterday." And then she said almost pathetically: "We couldn't have more trouble, could we?"

Ellen brought in a card. She handed it to Mrs. Carlyon. Sir Bertram Dane.

"Who's Sir Bertram Dane?" said Stephanie, peeping over the card.

"Sir Bertram Dane is a director of the Star Insurance Company. At least there is a Sir Bertram Dane who is a director. That's the only one I know."

"But I don't see," said Stephanie, "what a director could come and see you about."

Nor did Mrs. Carlyon. Still, the best way to find out was to go in and see him.

She left Stephanie sitting on the seat, and went into the drawing-room.

When she had gone Stephanie found her mother had left

her handkerchief behind her, so she ran after her with it, but she was in the room by the time she had caught her up. Stephanie opened the drawing-room door just in time to hear Sir Bertram Dane say:

"I'm very sorry, but I am afraid I have come about rather an unpleasant matter."

Stephanie knew now what Lancelot meant when he said that his knees were shaking so hard that they nearly shook him off his feet.

She could not go in and give her mother the handkerchief. Somehow she could not bear to. She went back to the dining-room.

What was the unpleasant thing Sir Bertram had come down to tell her mother?

Mr. Watts had got to the insurance office that morning ten minutes before his usual time. It was not any good his getting there so early, since Sir Bertram very rarely went down before half-past ten.

Mr. Watts meant to tell no one but Sir Bertram himself about his discovery. When Sir Bertram did come it was quite a long time before he consented to see Mr. Watts. When Mr. Watts sent in to know if he could have an interview, a message was returned to know what he wanted. Mr. Watts still insisted that he must see Sir Bertram. So another message was returned. Sir Bertram would try and give him five minutes towards the end of the morning.

Mr. Watts was not cast down by Sir Bertram's lack of enthusiasm.

Of course, he did not know yet what he had to tell him. He thought he was just going to bother him about a rise of pay or a holiday, like any other clerk. He did not know what an exceptionally able man he had got when he engaged William Watts.

At half-past twelve Sir Bertram saw him. He told his story. Sir Bertram did not give him much encouragement. When it was finished he waited for the praise.

Now Sir Bertram made his first observation.

"Considering that your suspicions were aroused when you were canvassing for the premium, I think you should have warned us at the time. By your negligence to do so you have allowed us to become involved in what may be a very troublesome case. But there, I daresay the whole thing is a mare's nest."

"If you trouble to make investigations," said Mr. Watts, rather huffed by the reception his great piece of news had been given, "you'll find there's no mare's nest about it at all."

Sir Bertram looked at him.

The overbearing manner of this clerk was impossible. For some time now he had been annoyed with his mannerisms and air of importance. Nevertheless, he thought sufficiently seriously of the matter not to banish it at once from his mind. He sent for the file of the tapestry case, and for all information concerning it.

It might be possible that some fraud had been practised on the company.

He would go to Combe himself and see into it.

But when he heard the anxious note in Mrs. Carlyon's voice as she said: "Oh, I hope it's nothing very unpleasant," he felt sure it was a mare's nest.

She looked straight at him out of two honest blue eyes. Then she asked him to sit down.

He sat on the sofa, and she sat on the chair. Almost apologising as he did so, he told her the story. He took a long time telling it, for he was anxious to make her understand that he really had not any suspicions, but as the matter had been brought to his notice by a clerk, in the interests of the company he had to clear it up.

The telling of that story seemed to take hours to the waiting Stephanie. Oh dear, whatever could it be all about? Whatever was happening?

Then Ellen came into the dining-room.

"Your mother wants you in the drawing-room, Miss Stephanie."

She tried to gather from her mother's face as she went into the drawing-room what had occurred. She looked a little tired, and the rings round her eyes were darker.

"This is my little daughter, Stephanie," she said, as she drew her towards her. "I want you to tell her all you have told me. She has a wise head on her shoulders." Then she said: "No, it's rather a shame to ask you to tell her. I will do so. Do you remember Mr. Watts, the agent who first came down to ask me to insure the Ladye Stephanie's Knight Errant?"

"Oh, yes," said Stephanie. "I don't think I would have remembered him, but I met him again. I was out with Lancelot, and I told him I knew you would not mind his seeing the wall from which it was stolen."

"Well," said Mrs. Carlyon, "Mr. Watts did not really just come back to see the scene of the theft. He had got an idea. What do you think it was?"

Now Mrs. Carlyon was laughing.

"He thought I'd hidden the tapestry to get the insurance money."

"Mummie," said Stephanie indignantly, "what an awful idea!"

"No, I haven't got the story quite right," said Mrs. Carlyon. "He didn't think I had hidden it. He thought that I had given it someone to hide for me. And you will be amused when you hear to whom he thought I had given it —to poor little Lancelot."

Now they were all laughing, Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie at the idea of queer funny, little Lancelot being selected for the accomplice, and Sir Bertram just because the other two were laughing, and their laughter was so young and joyous.

Sir Bertram got up to leave.

"I may tell you, Mrs. Carlyon," he said, "that I am more than satisfied. I have half a mind to sack that clerk of mine. I have already had enough of the fellow's impudence."

"Oh no," said Mrs. Carlyon. "I expect he thought he was acting for the best."

"I am sure," said Sir Bertram, "it's very nice of you to take it so generously, and I hope that when you and Miss Stephanie are over my way you'll drop in to lunch or tea with me. And if Miss Stephanie likes peaches——"

"Oh, don't I?" said Stephanie.

"She can fill as many baskets as she likes and bring them home with her."

When he was gone Stephanie and Mrs. Carlyon went back to the dining-room.

Miss Green came down. She knew who had called. While the three had been in the drawing-room she had slipped downstairs to borrow an iron from Ellen, at least that was her excuse, but, of course, it was really to ask Ellen who was in the drawing-room. Mrs. Carlyon was so frank and open that she told Miss Green at once about the interview. Miss Green was relieved that Mr. Watts had in no way connected her with the evidence.

She thought Mrs. Carlyon had been very lucky to get off so easily. The fact that the tapestry was under Lancelot's bedroom floor had convinced her that Mrs. Carlyon had managed the theft. However, this was not her affair. The only thing that mattered was that she and her brother knew where the tapestry was, and that they must get it away before it should be removed from its present hiding-place.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

THE INVALID PROGRESSES

The car was repaired by the following morning.

Mr. Green called for his sister. He again told Mrs. Carlyon how sorry he was that he had recommended her such an unfortunate investment. But, of course, you never knew for certain. Things that went wrong suddenly, equally

suddenly went right, and he would be sure to let her know at once if there was any hope of Brazilian Oils recovering.

Miss Green could not thank them enough for their kindness.

All the same, when Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie saw the last of the car whizzing down the road, they looked at each other and heaved a sigh of relief, for although they were quite sure Miss Green was all that Canon Weston had said she was—kind and good and charitable—they had not found her a very entertaining companion.

"About that tapestry," said Mr. Green to his sister, as they turned the corner of the road. "I'd like to make one more try to get it before we leave the neighbourhood."

Miss Green suggested that she should call to say good-bye to Lancelot. So when they came to Oaklands Mr. Green pulled up the car, and Miss Green got out and rang the bell.

Luck helped her thus far. She actually got into Lancelot's bedroom, for when she asked to say good-bye to him, Mrs. Bennett, who had come to open the door to her, bade her come upstairs, for the little darling was still tired after his attack, and she was not going to allow him to get up until the afternoon. Miss Green had the exasperation of knowing that she was actually standing on the floor under which the tapestry was hidden, and that she had no chance of getting it.

When she reached the car she said to her brother:

"Now we must be getting on," which meant she did not wish to say any more until they were out of earshot. When they had gone down the road a little way, she said: "The doting mother is keeping the darling little invalid in bed. He won't be down until this afternoon."

Mr. Green looked doubtful, and said:

"Well, I don't think it would be wise to hang about here any longer. Any moment the removal of the Duchess's furs may be discovered. I never thought of the box being

opened again this year, seeing she is in South Africa. Last night, however, when I was in the chemist's, her maid came in, and I overheard her saying she was going to repack them in a day or two, as her mistress wanted them put in the Bank for greater safety. But if we hear nothing further in the matter during the next twelve hours, we might perhaps slip back again. However, it is better anyhow to let the tapestry go than find ourselves mixed up in the Fur Theft."

So the Greens went on their way.

Mrs. Bennett would not let Lancelot get up until after tea, although he begged to do so soon after lunch. She had said after tea, and after tea it was to be. He must keep quiet and have a little nap.

She shut the door very gently, and as she sat in the morning-room doing some dainty needlework, she pictured Lancelot with his head on the pillow and his eyes closed, lying quietly in bed.

But Lancelot was doing nothing of the kind. He wanted to be quite sure that the tapestry was still safely under the boards. He had had a nightmare. Somebody had found it, and had taken it away. Oh, it had been a dreadful dream. They had chased him, and he had chased them. At last they'd caught him, and they would not believe he was anything but a thief.

He rolled back the carpet. He never suspected that anyone had lifted the board since he had nailed it down the previous morning, for when Mr. Watts had replaced the flooring he had been careful to nail it down again in the same way as he had found it.

It was there all right. He put back the boards, and rolled the carpet over them once more. He climbed back into bed. He did wish Mr. MacRory would think of a way out of his difficulty. He hoped he would see him again soon.

Yesterday morning, miserable as he was feeling, he had managed to write him a little note. He had given it Bessie to post. This was what he had said:

"Dear Mr. MacRory,

"I'm so worried lest anyone should think I was a thief. Please tell me what I am to do soon. I am in bed with a bilious attack. But I hope to get up to-morrow afternoon. Only I shan't be allowed out, or I would have come and seen you.

"Your terribly unhappy

"Lancelot."

When Mrs. Bennett brought up the tea-tray, she crept in on tiptoe.

"Have you had a nice nap, darling?" she asked, as she pulled up the little table and put down the tray beside him.

"I didn't go to sleep," said Lancelot.

"No matter," she said. "The rest will have done my precious good."

She allowed Lancelot to get up half-an-hour after tea. Lest he should feel shaky or a little faint, she helped him to dress. And when he was dressed she told him to go downstairs while she opened the window, because he must not stand about in draughts.

She turned down the bed, put his clothes tidy, and last of all, opened the window wide at the bottom. She believed in fresh air even for a delicate child like Lancelot. Then she went downstairs to see how the little patient was feeling.

Oh, how she fussed! The fire was rather low, and the coal was so small. So she rang the bell for Bessie to fetch more coal. When she brought it she told her to build up a nice big fire, and then she sent her to fetch a rug from the dining-room to tuck over the little patient. Indeed she occupied Bessie for the best part of half-an-hour. She had a reason for keeping her busy downstairs. She knew these maids. They would never let a bed air properly. She would be slipping upstairs to get it finished, and the bed would not be properly aired.

When the fire was made up and Lancelot was settled

comfortably on the sofa, Mrs. Bennett sat down close beside him. Then she had yet another thought.

She would have liked to make him a little delicacy for his supper. Something that he would fancy. She would like to make it herself. But if she went out into the kitchen, she would have to leave him alone. The dear little man had been so much alone already that day.

It was then that a visitor was announced: "Mr. MacRory."

Mrs. Bennett had heard a great deal about Mr. MacRory from Lancelot. She knew that he was the great artist who had discovered Stephanie's talent. For one moment she had a hope that perhaps he had come to say he had found a hidden talent in Lancelot.

Anyway, here was a chance to show him Lancelot's work.

There was that little steam engine he had drawn, and the boat he had painted. She had got them both safely away upstairs in the drawer.

As soon as she had shaken hands with him and told him it was very kind of him to come and see her ailing lad, she went hurrying out of the room to find Lancelot's drawings.

Then Lancelot said quickly:

"Did you come because of my letter? She doesn't know I've written."

"Ay, I came because of your letter," said Mr. MacRory, "and because I've been thinking over things."

He drew up his chair beside the sofa.

"I've come to this conclusion. You will go on being worried till the truth is out. The only mind that is at rest is the truthful mind. You must go, laddie, to Mrs. Carlyon and tell her the story from the beginning."

Lancelot suddenly felt a load roll off his mind. He felt he could not go on like this any longer. He would be glad to tell. Even though it might be difficult, because Mrs. Carlyon might blame him, and say he ought never to have done it, he need not feel guilty any longer, and would be able to walk about no longer afraid that any day the

tapestry might be discovered and he might be taken for a thief.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll do it to-morrow."

And the artist nodded his head.

"That's it—that's right, laddie," he said. "Do it straight away."

"Thank you very much for coming over."

"I was worried that I had not told you right away to act straight," answered Mr. MacRory. "But there, I was so surprised that evening, so taken aback by what you told me, that I did not seem to have the head to think clearly."

Then Mrs. Bennett came back with the engine and the boat. Poor Lancelot began to feel quite uncomfortable while she was showing his pictures.

"There. Isn't that funnel nice?" said Mrs. Bennett. "And look at all the windows in the house."

And Mr. MacRory said:

"Verra nice—verra nice. But no' the hand of a genius."

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

ANOTHER THREE O'CLOCK VISITOR

THE following afternoon Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie were once more sitting in the dining-room. Again Stephanie heard the church clock strike three.

"That awful three o'clock," said Stephanie. "I'm really getting quite superstitious about it."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Carlyon. "Nothing happened yesterday at three o'clock."

They heard steps.

"There is somebody coming," said Stephanie.

But it was only Lancelot.

"So he's recovered," said Mrs. Carlyon, "from his bilious attack."

He opened the dining-room door and came in.

"Feeling better?" she said.

"Yes. Quite all right," he answered.

He went on talking hurriedly, which was very unusual for him.

"I'd have been here this morning, only I wasn't let get up till lunch. I've got something to tell you. And I've made up my mind to do it. And I'm not going to stop till it's done. And I don't like saying it. But Mr. MacRory says I ought to, because if I don't, and it was found out, they'd think I was a thief. And that would not be fair to my parents, and might lead to a lot of trouble. And it might be much more difficult for you then, than if I told you straight away now."

He was obliged to stop at last to take breath. He was standing with his elbows akimbo, his toes rather turned in and his head poked forward.

Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie had no idea what he meant.

But Stephanie had a nasty uncomfortable feeling that it was something unpleasant, that it was yet one more untimely three o'clock visit.

"I see," said Mrs. Carlyon. "You have something you want to tell us."

She was very nice to Lancelot. She held out her hand.

"Come and sit down on the settee beside me, and tell me all about it. I'm sure it's nothing so very dreadful."

"I'd rather tell you standing," said Lancelot, and his elbows went out an inch further, and he dug his heels into the carpet. "I did it to help Stephanie. I took the tapestry, and hid it under a board in my bedroom, so you could get the money and she could go to school. There—you know."

They did know. And they were horror-stricken.

Only two days ago Sir Bertram had been there, and all the troubles had been settled up nicely. They had all been so certain that the tapestry had been stolen by genuine thieves.

"You really mean you did this thing," said Mrs. Carlyon.

"Yes," said Lancelot.

Then he burst into a flood of tears. And suddenly, before they could say another word to him, he turned and fled out of the house.

They were both too concerned, however, at the sudden development events had taken, to think of Lancelot.

"This is terrible," said Mrs. Carlyon. "Don't you see what it means?"

"It means," said Stephanie, "that the tapestry was never properly stolen."

"And that we had no right," said Mrs. Carlyon, "to the insurance money."

Then Mrs. Carlyon said: "Sir Bertram must hear about this at once. I don't know quite what it means, or what will happen, but I can't rest a moment until he hears the true story."

Stephanie felt the same. There was a 'bus at 4.15 to Barntown. Mrs. Carlyon said she would go by that. Stephanie coaxed to be allowed to go as well.

It was about five o'clock when they reached the insurance office. The clerk of whom they enquired for Sir Bertram was doubtful as to whether he would see them, because he had a meeting of directors at half-past five, and was hurrying to finish some business.

Mrs. Carlyon asked for a piece of paper. She scribbled a message on it.

"I have some very important information to give you," she wrote, "about the disappearance of the tapestry called 'Stephanie's Knight Errant.'"

A few moments later she and Stephanie were shown into Sir Bertram's private room. She did not waste any time. She made no excuses—no comments. She just told him the story.

"I know," she added when she had finished, "that you will believe me when I tell you that I had not the least idea when you came down to see me two days ago that the boy had acted in this way."

"I am quite certain of that, Mrs. Carlyon," said Sir

Bertram. "But, of course," he added, "the matter is a serious one. The whole story will have to be laid in front of my directors. Fortunately, we have a meeting here at half-past five, so I shall not have to keep you too long in suspense as to what action they will take in the matter. Are you on the telephone?"

Mrs. Carlyon shook her head.

"Then I'll write to you to-night after the meeting," he said. "You should get the letter in the morning."

Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie felt so tired after the interview that, as they had half-an-hour to wait for the 'bus to take them home, they went into a confectioner's shop to get a cup of tea.

Meanwhile exciting events were taking place at Combe Cottage.

Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie had barely started off in the 'bus, when a strange man arrived at the house. He asked for Mrs. Carlyon, but on finding her out, put some questions to Ellen.

He asked for Miss Green. Ellen told him that she had left.

Then he began to make still more searching enquiries. When had she left? With whom? That morning, with her brother by car.

Could she give him any information as to which way they were travelling?

Ellen began to grow hoity-toity. What business had this strange man coming and putting questions to her like this? So she answered irritably:

"Them that asks questions get fewest answers."

She was about to shut the door in his face when he leant his body against it, and forced it open, so she could not shut him out.

Now he was a wise man, and he saw the best thing he could do was to take Ellen into his confidence. He took out of his pocket a visiting card and handed it to her.

Printed on it was: "Mr. John Pearce, Scotland Yard."

That made Ellen jump. She stood looking at him, open-mouthed.

"So you see," he said, "I have my reasons for asking questions."

"But I don't see," said Ellen, really interested now, "what you're doing looking for Miss Green and her brother."

His answer made Ellen jump still more.

"They're a pair of the most cunning thieves in Great Britain. And they've been wanted for some time by the Yard. Two days ago a boxful of valuable furs was stolen from the Duchess of Greybonnie's."

"Never!" said Ellen. She knew the Duchess very well by name, as she lived at Lidden Hall, only seven miles from Combe.

"Investigations have been made, and it has been ascertained that Mr. Green had been seen in the neighbourhood of Combe. Further, that his sister, Miss Green, was a paying guest at this cottage. Of course, they are not known to us under the name of Green. They have many names. We know them as Horton. But from the description that was brought to us, we have not much doubt that the couple masquerading as Green are really the Horton thieves. The very fact that they have gone now, just after this burglary, is exceedingly suspicious."

"Good gracious," said Ellen, as her mind went racing to another event. "Then most likely it was them who stole our tapestry."

Mr. Pearce had also thought of this. This was another reason which had brought him to the cottage.

Directly he had discovered the Greens were in the neighbourhood and that Miss Green was actually in the house from which the tapestry had been taken, he had been pretty sure of the same thing.

It was very disappointing to think they had escaped. He had hoped they would have had no warning that their identity had been discovered.

Ellen suggested that Mr. Pearce should wait till Mrs. Carlyon returned.

The 'bus reached the corner at half-past six, and Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie, still feeling very tired, got out. They were indeed surprised when Ellen came rushing to the door to tell them that Mr. Pearce, of Scotland Yard, was waiting for them in the drawing room. "And Miss Green and her brother weren't nice people at all," Ellen chatted on. "They were thieves who had taken the Duchess's furs, and, of course, it was them who had taken the tapestry."

But, alas, Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie knew that of whatever else they might be guilty, from the theft of "Stephanie's Knight Errant" they were at least exonerated.

There was no reason to hide the story now, so Mrs. Carlyon told Ellen that it was misguided Lancelot, not the Greens, who had taken the tapestry. She repeated the same story to the detective, who felt disappointed to hear it.

Well, he allowed that the Greens were cleared from the tapestry at all events; but they were the pair who had taken the furs from the Duchess, of that fact he was pretty certain.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

RICH COLONEL ELLIS

The excitement of the discovery about Miss Green gave Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie something to think about other than their visit to Sir Bertram Dane. Mrs. Carlyon said that Canon Weston must be told at once, or else perhaps Miss Green would go back one day to his parish and he would recommend her to other friends.

Poor old Canon Weston! Was anyone ever taken in so easily?

Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie could not help laughing over the many laudatory things he had said of Miss Green.

Then Mrs. Carlyon thought of something else. It was

Mr. Green who had advised her to take shares in Brazilian Oils. There was probably no such company, and her money had gone into his pocket.

Mrs. Carlyon was so tired that she went to bed directly after supper. Stephanie sat on the window-sill in her mother's bedroom. She found it rather difficult to give her mind to sewing or to reading.

At nine o'clock the front door bell rang.

"It's better at nine than at three," said Stephanie.

Ellen came into the room. Sir Bertram Dane was in the drawing-room, and would like to see Mrs. Carlyon.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Carlyon. "I wouldn't have gone to bed if I'd known he was coming. I wonder what he wants."

"Shall I go down and see?" asked Stephanie. "Then I can come up and tell you."

Sir Bertram Dane was standing on the hearthrug when Stephanie went into the drawing-room. He must have guessed from her anxious face and the quick nervous way she spoke that she was feeling uneasy.

"It's all right, little girl," he said. "Don't you be afraid. The directors are not going to be hard on you. They have most of them young families themselves. I have been to see your friend Lancelot, and I am satisfied that what he did was entirely out of eagerness to help you. If I felt assured that there really has not been any intention to defraud, the directors gave me permission to settle the affair in the simplest way. You have got your tapestry back, so all we're going to do is to ask to have our money back."

Stephanie looked uncomfortable.

Sir Bertram was surprised she did not say eagerly: "Of course, of course you must have your money back."

When he spoke it was a little huffily.

"You couldn't expect, could you, to keep your tapestry and our money?"

Her lips were trembling.

"Now run along, little girl, and tell your mother, and she will understand."

But Stephanie did not move towards the door. She did something very unexpected. She sat down on the sofa, covered her eyes with her arm, and burst into a flood of tears. Sir Bertram sat down beside her.

"You are over-tired," he said. "That's what it is. There—there now. Don't you cry. It's all right—it's all right. I expect that little mother of yours will be anxious to hear what has been arranged, so you go and tell her."

"There—there isn't any money," Stephanie gasped between her sobs.

"What do you mean?"

"When you sent it to us, Mummie was advised to invest it in Brazilian Oils, and it's gone smash. And she doesn't believe there ever was Brazilian Oils now. You see she was advised by Mr. Green here, whose sister was living with us. They've both gone away. And they were really thieves."

Sir Bertram looked at Stephanie doubtfully. It was the first time that he had been the least suspicious. But it did seem an extraordinary story.

"And we haven't any more money, because Mummie has only an income of £250 a year."

Stephanie was very sensitive to atmosphere. She suddenly had a feeling that Sir Bertram was doubtful of her.

"It's quite true, it's quite true," she pleaded. "It all happened when we were out. I mean, the detective coming to find Miss Green and her brother. Ellen will tell you, if you don't believe me, because it was she who saw him."

She looked at him so straight that Sir Bertram, unusual as the story was, felt he was not going to call Ellen to ask her to repeat it.

"I believe you," he said, "and it's very hard lines you should have been swindled out of the money. It makes things difficult now." He was thinking deeply. "But of course," he said, "there is the tapestry. You could sell that."

"But we couldn't," said Stephanie.

Again Sir Bertram had a doubt. A second later it passed away.

"Nobody will buy it. That was the original trouble. It was because we couldn't sell it that Lancelot took it. We tried and tried. No one seemed to want it."

It was a few moments before Sir Bertram spoke again. When he did so, it was slowly.

"I'm afraid," he said, "my company will insist on the return of the money. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll come over in the morning and see your mother. Will you tell her I will be here about ten o'clock?"

Poor Mrs. Carlyon had a sleepless night.

Of course, the moment Sir Bertram had left Stephanie had rushed upstairs to tell her. She could not see any way in which she could return the money.

She and Stephanie were very silent next morning at breakfast.

When Sir Bertram arrived, however, he was in the cheeriest of good spirits.

"I've done a good bit of work for you," he said. "The merest luck. Extraordinary that Ellis should have come just at this moment."

Then he told them that, when he had reached home on the previous evening he had found a very old friend waiting for him—Colonel Ellis by name.

"An exceedingly wealthy man," he said, turning to Mrs. Carlyon. "Made a fortune, lost a fortune, made a fortune. And he hasn't had time yet to lose it for the second time. Interested in all sorts of art treasures. I was telling him about your piece of tapestry. 'What,' he said, 'Stephanie's Knight Errant for sale? That famous piece of needlework? I'll buy it.' And he means it. He is going to join me here in a short while. He will pay you the cheque, if you will hand him over the tapestry."

And again came that tiny grain of suspicion when Mrs. Carlyon said:

"I haven't got it here."

But it was swept away almost before it was felt.

"It is still with Lancelot Bennett."

"But I'll go now and get it," said Stephanie. "It's quite light to carry. I will bring it back."

"Take my car, young woman. That will be the quickest way of getting there."

He took Stephanie down to the car, popped her into it, and told the chauffeur to drive her to Oaklands.

When he got back into the drawing-room Mrs. Carlyon was still standing by the window. She turned as he came into the room.

"I can't thank you enough," she said. "I'm not the least good at saying what I feel, but I am most enormously grateful. I am sure it was you who prevailed on your friend to help us."

"No. Not at all," said Sir Bertram. "The moment I mentioned the name of the tapestry he was crazy to have it."

"Well, anyhow," said Mrs. Carlyon, "it's a wonderful solution to our difficulties, because honestly I should not have known where to turn to get the money to refund the company. I suppose it would have been very serious if I had not been able to pay it back?"

"I am afraid it would have been very serious indeed for you," said Sir Bertram. "You would have been prosecuted for fraud. It was a large amount. But there," he said, "it's no good thinking about all the unpleasant things that might have happened. Ah, here comes Colonel Ellis."

"Do ask him to come in," said Mrs. Carlyon.

Sir Bertram went down the pathway to meet the small, bright-eyed little man who had made two fortunes.

And how was Lancelot taking these new developments?

That same morning after breakfast he told his mother.

"And you went out in the middle of the night," she wailed. "Oh, my darling, you might have caught cold. And you hid it in your room." Then she said suddenly: "I

don't know what your father will say about it. He will be angry."

"I didn't know there was any harm in it," sobbed poor Lancelot.

"No, of course you didn't," said Mrs. Bennett. "But as your father is away," she added, "perhaps we need never tell him. Now Mrs. Carlyon knows, all you have to do is to take her back her tapestry. I'm sure, if we ask her, she won't say anything about it. After all, you did it for the best. It was just that you didn't understand."

It was then that Stephanie came.

She jumped out of the car, and the front door being wide open, she ran into the house and into the morning-room. But there she suddenly stopped. Suppose Lancelot had not told Mrs. Bennett? A moment afterwards she was reassured.

"Lancelot has told me," she said.

Stephanie looked towards Lancelot. He was so pale and so small this morning. Suddenly she felt pity for him.

"I know you did it for the best," she said, "because you wanted to help me."

And he was very grateful to her for being so kind to him.

"But I want to take it back now," she said, "because somebody is going to buy it, so we can give back the money to the company."

Lancelot felt he would be very glad indeed to get rid of the tapestry. They all three went upstairs to his bedroom. He knelt down to roll back the carpet. Stephanie stood watching him, interested to see where Lancelot had actually hidden it.

Mrs. Bennett looked out of the window.

"Dear, dear," she said, "I didn't think the night was as windy as that. A bough of the walnut tree is broken."

But neither Lancelot nor Stephanie was listening to her. Lancelot had rolled the carpet right back by now. But he had not attempted to lift up the board. Instead he sat

back on his heels, and his mouth had fallen open. Stephanie had drawn a little nearer. What was it that made Lancelot look so strange? Then he gave three gasps.

"Oh—— Oh——"

Mrs. Bennett turned from the window.

"Yes?" she asked.

"It's not nailed down. It was nailed down."

"What do you mean?" gasped Stephanie.

"Somebody's unnailed it."

He pulled at the board. His fingers were trembling so, he could not lift it. At last he got it up.

"It's gone," he said.

"No," said Stephanie. "It can't have gone."

"It's got pushed to the back," said Mrs. Bennett.

They all three stood peering into the empty hole. Lancelot pulled up another board. And yet another. But there was no doubt about it. The tapestry had gone.

"It was there on Wednesday afternoon at three o'clock, because I looked myself."

"But you were in bed, darling," said Mrs. Bennett.

"You thought I was in bed," said Lancelot. "It was there," he repeated, "the day before yesterday."

Mrs. Bennett walked back to the window. Then she said almost reminiscently:

"And a branch of the walnut tree is broken."

For a moment Stephanie stood unable to speak. She could scarcely realize all that it meant to them, this terrible new discovery. Then she said:

"But they're waiting for it. I must go and tell them it's gone."

She was so stunned that she did not even stop to wonder who had taken it. All she knew was that it was gone, and she had to break the news.

She got into the motor and crouched in the corner. Oh, how quickly she seemed to get there! Her thoughts flew to Sir Bertram. Once or twice she had felt he was suspicious. Now what would he say? Her mind went back to things

he had said: "You can't have your tapestry and my money." He would think they were keeping back the tapestry, hoping he would believe it had been stolen, and have pity on them, and let them off paying the money. They were at the gate now. She sat in the car, and did not attempt to get out, until the chauffeur said:

"You're back, Miss."

From the pathway she could see into the drawing-room. There was Sir Bertram, looking quite contented. There was a strange man. That must be Colonel Ellis. And her mother was sitting on the sofa.

Mrs. Carlyon saw Stephanie, waved to her and smiled. Oh dear, this was terrible! Her mother never doubted but that she had it. How could she tell them?

She opened the door. And she told them.

She could not have believed it was possible she could tell them straight away like that. It just burst from her.

"It's gone. When we looked under the floor it wasn't there."

"Do you mean—— Are you trying to tell me," said Sir Bertram, "that it's been stolen again?"

And the satirical note in his voice that Stephanie so dreaded to hear was there once again, only much more emphatic than it had been before.

Stephanie stood in front of him. Her face was scarlet with rage. She felt she would have liked to slap him in the face. She had never felt like that before.

"I'm not *trying* to tell you. I *am* telling you."

"But, darling," said Mrs. Carlyon, "it can't have gone again."

"It's wonderful how things can go," said Sir Bertram. He was angry now with himself for ever having been won over by a charm of manner. "Well, as you haven't got the tapestry or the money, it puts rather a difficult complexion on things."

"But we ought to be able to get it back," said poor Mrs. Carlyon, getting frantic at Sir Bertram's hostile attitude.

"Surely we shall be able to find out who has taken it, and recover it."

"We haven't had time yet," said Stephanie, "to even think who might have taken it."

Sir Bertram bit his moustache before he spoke. Then it was with great deliberation. The hostile manner was still behind the words, although they were kind enough in themselves.

"I wish to be perfectly fair. My directors left it in my hands to arrange affairs. I will give you a fortnight. You must bring us either the money or the tapestry a fortnight from to-day."

He did not shake hands with them. He walked out.

But Colonel Ellis lingered for a moment.

"Look here," he said, "I hope you'll get it back. If you do, my offer holds good. I'm ready to buy 'Stephanie's Knight Errant' any time. There's my address."

He put a card down on the table, on which he had scribbled in the corner:

The Pall Mall Club,
S.W.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

MR. BECK'S INFORMATION

When Sir Bertram had gone, Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie sat close together on the settee in the drawing-room. Their only hope was to be able to find the tapestry. They were both quite sure who had taken it. It was those dreadful Greens.

Stephanie told her mother of the broken walnut branch outside Lancelot's bedroom. Miss Green must have known of the whereabouts of the tapestry, and Mr. Green must have climbed through the window and stolen it when the

room was empty—perhaps on that evening Lancelot was lying on the drawing-room sofa after his bilious attack.

But where were the Greens now? Nobody knew. The police were looking for them in connection with the fur robbery. They might not trace them.

"Oh, I wish, I wish," said Stephanie, "I could find them."

Neither Mrs. Carlyon nor Stephanie could eat much lunch.

The most worrying thing about it all was not to be able to think of anything to do.

After lunch Stephanie persuaded Mrs. Carlyon to go upstairs and rest. She went into the garden to try to occupy her mind by weeding the borders.

Here Lancelot found her half-an-hour later. He stood in front of her with his arms akimbo and his toes turned in, just as he had stood in front of the drawing-room settee on the previous day.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "Daddy came home this morning. I've told him."

Stephanie realized the effort it must have been to Lancelot to tell his father. Although she had been raging against Lancelot for having put them into this difficult position, when he was there she could not be unkind to him, or say hard things. She forgot her own troubles. She put herself in his place.

"Was it awfully difficult, because your father's such a stern man?"

"Yes," said Lancelot, "but the more difficult a thing is, the braver it makes you feel when you've done it. And if you're born a coward, it's an awfully nice feeling to be brave."

Stephanie said something which made Lancelot's heart leap with pleasure.

"I don't believe you're a coward. A coward wouldn't have come in the night and taken away the tapestry. He would have been afraid. A coward would not have gone and told his father. Wasn't he terribly angry with you?"

"He was at first," said Lancelot. "I don't know how it came about, but he understood that I had not known I was doing any harm. He said just what you said: 'Well, anyway, it shows you had some pluck, and coming straight to me like this and telling me shows you've got more pluck.' I think he was glad to find I had pluck. Then we had a long talk together. I didn't know he could be so nice. He explained to me that it was through my action that you and Mrs. Carlyon were being made to suffer. And that we could not let that be. And I don't think he meant me to tell you this. But I must, just to show you it's going to be all right. We're awfully poor, you know, and we don't own anything except our house. So we're going to sell it, because my father says that we are responsible for the money that Mrs. Carlyon has to pay back to the insurance company."

"But your mother," said Stephanie, "she couldn't bear to leave her home?"

"She isn't going to know anything about it until it's all done," said Lancelot. "Daddy and I are going to see it through. So perhaps you hadn't better tell Mrs. Carlyon, because we don't want Mummie to know until the house is actually sold. But Daddy says it's the only decent thing we could do."

Then Stephanie said: "I think you and your father are dears. But don't you understand we couldn't bear that you should sell your home to help us, because, after all, though you did take the tapestry, it was for my sake, and it was not your fault that it went again?"

"We've made up our minds," said Lancelot doggedly.

"No—no——" said Stephanie. Then she caught Lancelot's hand. "This makes it more necessary than ever that the tapestry should be found. You wouldn't really like to sell your house? I want the truth, Lancelot—the truth."

Lancelot had to own that he would be very sorry indeed to have to leave Oaklands, and he knew his father would as well. And they dreaded telling Mrs. Bennett.

"But we are going to do it," persisted Lancelot.

"But there wouldn't be any need," said Stephanie, "if only we could find the tapestry. Lancelot," she said, "let's see if we can't find it. I don't know how it is to be done. But it would be such a way out of all our troubles if we could only get it back again."

And Lancelot was fired with the adventure of it all. Supposing they could. Wouldn't it be splendid? To help Stephanie to look for it. Perhaps to find it for Stephanie. This would be real knight errantry. But how and where to start?

She told him all about the Greens. At first he was as sure as she was they had come the evening of his bilious attack and taken it. Then he had an objection. How could the Greens have known where he had hidden it?

But Stephanie overruled this obstacle at once. Mr. Watts had told Sir Bertram the story of his disguise as the carpenter. He had been so proud of it, that when Sir Bertram had asked him where he had got hold of the make-up, he had answered forgetfully:

"Miss Green gave it to me."

So, although he had promised to keep her name out of it as far as possible, he had been obliged in the end to own that it was she who had helped him. Was it not quite clear that they had discussed everything together, and that the agent had told her where the tapestry was hidden, unaware, of course, that she was out to steal it?

Although this made it still more sure that Miss Green was involved in the theft, it did not make it any easier to set to work to find her.

The pair went into the dining-room and sat over the fire, wrinkling their foreheads and thinking.

Ellen came into the room with a message from Mrs. Carlyon. She was so tired that she would not be down to tea. So would Stephanie not wait for her? Stephanie invited Lancelot to stop to tea with her. He accepted gladly.

The two continued to think while Ellen laid the table. The table was in the window, and as she spread out the

cups and saucers she looked along the road. Her attention was attracted to a man passing the gate. He turned and glanced towards the cottage. She thought for a moment that he was coming in, but he walked on slowly.

Who was he?

She thought she had seen him before. His tan squash hat seemed familiar. Then she remembered. Of course, he was the detective who had come to find out about Miss Green. Excitedly she pointed him out to Stephanie.

"The detective," said Stephanie quickly, "who came here the day we went to Barntown?"

"Yes, who was looking for them Greens who took the Duchess's furs, and worse than that, our tapestry," gasped Ellen. "I wonder if he's found them?"

The words were scarcely out of Ellen's mouth when Lancelot sprang up, dashed out of the room, flew down the path, flung open the gate, and went chasing down the road after Mr. Beck. Lancelot seemed to have lost all his shyness now. He caught hold of Mr. Beck by the arm, and poured out his story.

"They might have stolen it that night," he agreed, "or they might have doubled back next day."

"What do you mean by doubled back?" asked Lancelot.

Mr. Beck told Lancelot he had tracked the Greens as far as Fremingway. Fremingway was a village about twenty miles from Combe. They had stopped for lunch at the inn, leaving their car outside. Mr. Beck himself had found their car standing outside the inn. He had been following them on his motor bicycle. Opposite the inn was a hedge. He had hidden his motor bicycle behind it, and, crouching on the other side of it, had watched through a break in the leaves for the Greens to come out and start off again. He had waited until seven o'clock, but they had not come out.

He had not wanted to go into the inn, lest either of them should chance to know him by sight. He was very anxious they should have no idea they were being followed. However, he had felt he could not wait much longer. So he had

walked across the road to the inn. There had been no one in the great parlour, and he had rung the bell. The owner of the inn was an elderly widow. He had made the following inquiry of her:

"You had a couple in to lunch. Are they still here?"

"Oh no," she had answered. "They left hours ago. Directly after lunch. They paid their bill. When I came back into the room to clear the table, they had gone."

"But their car was still outside," Mr. Beck had persisted.

The landlady could not help where their car was, they were not there, and if the gentleman did not believe her, he could look through the inn, but she knew he would not find them.

He had taken her at her word, and had looked through the inn. She had spoken correctly. They were not in the house. Then he had gone back to the parlour again. There was a small back door set in the wall, which he had not noticed previously. He had opened it. It led into a yard. There was a gate from the yard into a road which ran behind the inn, joining the main road a mile and a half to the south. It was quite clear what they had done. Fearing their car might be known to the police, they had stranded it. Whether they picked up another afterwards, or what had happened to them, Mr. Beck, up to the present, could not tell. He had been to many garages, but there was not one of them that had let out a car that day to strangers.

But they would have had plenty of time, as he had said before, to double back to Combe, secure the tapestry, and get away again.

That was all he knew of the Greens, and if the young gentleman was interested, he was very pleased to have told him this much.

Full of the story, Lancelot could scarcely get back quick enough to Stephanie.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

AT THE LION INN

How Stephanie and Lancelot talked over tea!

Stephanie said that when you came to look at it carefully it was ridiculous being so excited about Mr. Beck's news. They had discovered this much. The Greens had stopped for lunch at the Lion Inn, Fremingway. But Mr. Beck did not know what had happened to them after that, so they really were not any further on.

But they could not help feeling excited, because it was rather exciting to think of the car being left outside all those hours, and Mr. and Miss Green slipping out of the back door.

When Stephanie thought of Miss Green, she could sometimes almost scarcely believe it. Stiff, prim Miss Green, who in all her spare time made clothes for the poor! It showed how dreadfully easily you might be taken in by people. To think she had actually been staying with them as a paying guest, and Stephanie had thought her dull.

When they heard a motor draw up at the gate, they both started. Who was that now? Really they were getting quite nervy.

"Perhaps it's Miss Green come back," said Lancelot wildly.

But the gate was now flung open, and a jolly-looking young man of about twenty-five came striding up the path.

"It's—it's Cousin Jack," cried Stephanie delighted. "My cousin—Cousin Jack, I thought he was in India."

"Well, Steph," he said, as she dashed out to meet him.

"Wherever have you come from?" asked Stephanie. "We thought you were in India."

"Home on leave," laughed Cousin Jack. "Arrived three days ago. And I thought I'd run round this way to see if Aunt Lucy would put me up for a night or two before I go up to Scotland to join the family."

Stephanie knew her mother would be delighted.

"She's resting now," she said.

"Don't wake her. Tea looks good," he laughed, as he surveyed the remains of the cake and bread and butter on the table.

"I'll tell Ellen to make you some fresh," said Stephanie. "That's Lancelot," she added, "a friend of mine. And the garage is round the back, if you want to put your car up."

Stephanie ran into the house.

"Ellen, Ellen—Cousin Jack's come," she said. "Back from India on leave. He's going to stay a day or two. Will you please make more tea? When Mum wakes up, will you tell me, please, so I can let her know?"

"She's awake now, Miss," said Ellen.

Stephanie ran up to her mother's bedroom and told her who had arrived. Mrs. Carlyon was delighted to think that Jack had come to see them.

"I'll be down quite soon," she said. "You must look after him until I'm ready. Tell him how pleased I am."

By this time Cousin Jack had put away his car in the garage. He had returned to the tea-table, and was endeavouring to make conversation with Lancelot. But poor Lancelot was overcome with an attack of shyness, and both he and Jack were much relieved when Stephanie came in again.

It was not until Cousin Jack had almost finished his tea that Stephanie told him anything of the recent happenings at Combe Cottage.

"Before Mum comes down I want to tell you all about it," she said. "Lancelot's got a lot to do with it. At first you may blame him. But you mustn't, because he only did it because he thought it would help me. And his father's so anxious to put it all right that he's going to sell his house. But we couldn't bear that. And that's why we've got to find the tapestry."

"It all sounds very exciting," said Cousin Jack. "Let's hear about it. Begin at the beginning."

Stephanie began at the beginning, and told the whole story.

"Well, I never," said Cousin Jack, when it was finished. "And I enter at the point that, unless we find the infamous Greens, there'll be no end to the trouble." He got quite excited. "Well, we'll have a look for them anyhow. A jolly good look."

"What do you mean?" said Stephanie.

"We'll go over to the Lion Inn and see what we can find."

Then Mrs. Carlyon came down. She had yet to hear all Mr. Beck had told, and it was neither Stephanie nor Lancelot who told her. It was Jack.

"And I want to run over to the Lion straight away," he said. "Perhaps we can find out something that old detective missed."

"We?" said Stephanie eagerly. "Oh, Cousin Jack, does that mean you are going to take us with you?"

"Rather," said Cousin Jack. "You and your faithful knight."

Cousin Jack was a very understanding person, and he had not blamed Lancelot. He had understood that this odd, difficult little boy had really acted to help his cousin Stephanie.

If they were eager to be off, Cousin Jack was still more eager.

"I wish I could come too," said Mrs. Carlyon, as she waved them off.

But she looked so headachy and tired that her nephew would not hear of it.

Stephanie sat beside Cousin Jack. Lancelot was tucked up in the dickey.

How they sped along the road! Stephanie's hair was flying in the wind. Lancelot had to hold on to his big cap with his hands.

"To the right," screamed Stephanie, "to the right," as they were about to shoot past the signpost where the road turned off to Fremingway.

Stephanie had never been to Fremingway. She wondered if it would be difficult to find the Lion. She hoped not. It was not difficult, because Fremingway was a tiny village.

"Look, Cousin Jack, look. There's the Lion," she said.

They could not miss it, because over the doorway stood a big lion, ridiculously large for the size of the inn, which was tiny. It was a very old inn, thatched, and with mullioned windows. There was the hedge opposite, behind which Mr. Beck had hidden. The Greens' car was not standing outside now; it had been taken away by the police.

Cousin Jack drew up in front of the inn. Stephanie sprang out. Lancelot sprang out. Jack sprang out.

There was no bell to ring, so they stood waiting in the stone-flagged passage. They could not see any owner—anyone about at all.

"Look here," said Cousin Jack. "I tell you what we had better do. We'll ask for tea, because if the widow guesses we've come to find out more about her visitors, she may get frightened, and not tell us anything."

Stephanie and Lancelot agreed this was a splendid idea.

"Isn't Cousin Jack wonderful?" said Stephanie in a whisper to Lancelot. "He thinks of everything."

Lancelot answered: "Yes, he's wonderful." And he looked at tall, fair Jack, and determined he would grow up to be like him—jolly and brave.

Still no one came.

"You kids go into the parlour," said Cousin Jack. "And I'll see if I can ferret someone out."

Stephanie and Lancelot went into the room in which Mr. and Miss Green yesterday had eaten lunch.

Jack found the widow in the kitchen. It was ironing day. She was hot and disagreeable.

She didn't know if she could give tea. There was another inn about a mile away—The Crossways. They could get it there.

"But not an inn like yours," said Cousin Jack in his

pleasantest manner. As a matter of fact, Cousin Jack had never seen The Crossways.

Mrs. Evans was susceptible to flattery.

"No, I can't say as how it's as good as this," she allowed.

"Of course," said Jack the Flatterer, "it's entirely a question of management. When you get an inn managed by anyone as capable as yourself, the comfort of guests is at once assured."

"I'm sure I do my best," Mrs. Evans replied.

"Anyone can tell that at a glance. I don't think I've ever been to an inn so beautifully clean and comfortable."

Mrs. Evans gave in.

"Perhaps I can manage the tea," she said. "Three, did you say? If you wait in the parlour, I'll see what can be done."

So Cousin Jack went back to the parlour. He told the others of the conversation in the kitchen. Stephanie and Lancelot thought he was more wonderful than ever when they heard how he had got round Mrs. Evans.

While Cousin Jack had been in the kitchen they had been examining the little door that led into the yard. It was exactly as Mr. Beck had described. It would have been quite a simple matter for the Greens to have gone out through it, crossed the yard, and from the yard reached the road which lay parallel to the one on which they had left their car. Which way they had gone when they turned on to the road, no one could say. The inn was in such a lonely position, apart from the rest of Fremingway.

While they were waiting for tea, they poked about the room.

Stephanie was hoping they might find a piece of paper with some indication written on it of which way the Greens were going. But Cousin Jack did not think that likely. The Greens would not commit their whereabouts to paper, or, if they did, they would not drop it so conveniently in the open parlour of an inn.

Still, Stephanie and Lancelot both declared you never

knew what you would find by looking, and they went on searching diligently in all likely and unlikely corners, while Cousin Jack opened the back door again, and stood looking into the yard, trying to picture the Greens' movements.

Enquiries had been made at the railway station. No one resembling the Greens had booked tickets. How had they got away? It might help things a great deal forward towards their discovery if they could only find out exactly what had happened from the moment they had opened that back gate.

"I've got something," said Lancelot.

Stephanie was looking in the bookcase, for they might have taken down a book and left something inside it. She turned round. Cousin Jack came in through the doorway.

Lancelot was holding a key. He had produced it from the depths of the armchair, where it had been stuffed down between the upholstery. Attached to it was a label. And on the label was written "Key of Mr. Robertson's garage."

They were all three looking at the key and the label, and wondering if there could be any connection between it and the Greens, when Mrs. Evans brought in the tea. She saw them looking at the key.

"Oh," she said, as she put down the tray. "Where did you get that?"

Cousin Jack explained that Lancelot had found it down the chair.

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Evans. "Fancy that now. That's where it had got to. It's been mislaid for days. It's the key of Mr. Robertson's garage. He's abroad, and he's stored his car here while he's away. He always leaves the car with us, because he says he knows it's safe. I know how the key came there," she added. "It was in the work-basket, and I was sitting sewing the other evening in that chair. It must have slipped out and gone down the chair. But I'm very glad to have it back again, because when somebody trusts you it makes you feel more anxious not to

disappoint them. Although I knew it was all right really, I did not like the key to be missing."

And Mrs. Evans was so pleased to have the key again that the last remnant of her ill-humour vanished.

While they were having their tea she stopped and talked to them, standing on the hearthrug first, and then, without realizing it, sitting on the chair, still going on talking.

But it was not, alack and alas, of Mr. and Miss Green she talked, it was of Mr. Robertson and his wonders.

The inn was on the Robertson estate, and her father had rented it before her—that was, of course, from the old Mr. Robertson, not the present Mr. Robertson. As a matter of fact, young Mr. Thomas had only just come into the property. She called him young Mr. Thomas—not that he was young, he being over forty. But he was younger than his father. And she did not see that she had said anything in the least funny.

Still she went on talking. The death duties and the taxes being what they was, poor Mr. Thomas could not afford to keep up the place, so he had let it for a year and gone abroad. That's how it came about he had left the car with her.

They had finished their tea now. Mrs. Evans noticed this.

"I'll show it to you, if you like," she said. "It's a proper beauty. It's a plum-coloured Wolseley, with an R. on the panels. R. for Robertson," she explained, but they had, of course, all guessed at once for what the R. stood.

Cousin Jack realized that he was not likely to hear about the Greens until she had finished with Mr. Robertson. So he frowned at the children, who were getting impatient.

"Oh yes, we'd like to see the car," he said. "Come on, youngsters, Mrs. Evans is going to show us Mr. Robertson's car."

Mrs. Evans waddled importantly across the yard. Cousin Jack followed her. Stephanie and Lancelot followed Cousin Jack.

There was no need to put the key in the padlock and

IT WAS EMPTY

turn it, for as she took the padlock in her hand to do so, it came undone.

"Oh!" she said. "What's this?" There was a note of anxiety in her voice. "The padlock's open." She looked at it. "It's been broken," she said.

Now the note of anxiety was more pronounced. She pulled open the door. The four of them stood looking into the garage. It was empty.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

PURSUIT TO WILMINGTON

It was some time before Cousin Jack could move Mrs. Evans from the spot. All she kept saying was "Wherever has it gone?" and "What shall I do?"

At last, however, he prevailed on her to come back to the parlour and sit down quietly, while they considered the loss of the car from every point of view.

Again Stephanie and Lancelot felt what a wonderful power of authority Cousin Jack possessed, for although Mrs. Evans had only seen him for the first time that afternoon, she seemed quite ready to give him her confidence, and to grow easier in her mind as Cousin Jack, seated at the table, asked her questions and made suggestions—in fact, began to lift the worry from poor Mrs. Evans' shoulders.

The moment they had found the garage empty, Cousin Jack, Stephanie and Lancelot had guessed that the Greens had taken the car. They must have been aware that Mr. Robertson kept it at the inn. Mrs. Evans confessed to having told them it was there. She was so proud of the fact, that she told most people. It was obvious that they had not used the key Lancelot had found, since if they had done so, there would have been no need to break the padlock.

But it was a lucky thing that Lancelot had found the key, otherwise Mrs. Evans might never have wished to

show them the car. Through the missing car they might perhaps find the Greens. They had something to track now. They must discover the whereabouts of Mr. Robertson's plum-coloured car.

Cousin Jack told Mrs. Evans that he suspected it was the Greens who had taken it. But Mrs. Evans was still troubled. She did not see how they could have got it away without her hearing, she being in the inn.

Then she remembered something. Not long after she had told them about Mr. Robertson's car Miss Green had come into her kitchen and said that her brother had seen some boys stealing the apples off her trees, and that they had gone running down the road. Mrs. Evans had been having a lot of trouble with the boys. She went after them. But they had run out of sight by the time she got on to the road. She had thought they might have escaped through Farmer Gretton's meadow. But they were not there. She had met Farmer Gretton. When she had told him about her apples he had told her about his pears, how they had gone overnight. And Farmer Gretton, being a good old talker—again Cousin Jack endeavoured not to smile—had kept her chatting for some while.

Then she had recollected that she had a cake in the oven, and she had gone straight into her kitchen, and never thought any more of the people in the parlour, until the motor cyclist had come asking for them. Now she was of the opinion that they had made up the tale about the boys to get her out of the way, so that they might take the car.

She was so distressed that Cousin Jack and the children felt very sorry for her. Cousin Jack told her that they were looking for the Greens, and that the gentleman who called yesterday on the motor cycle was on the same errand. He told her that the knowledge that the car had been stolen was very valuable to them. The car itself, being a distinctive one, might enable them to trace the Greens. Once they were traced, he thought the chances were Mr. Robertson's car would be safely returned to her. She must, of course,

acquaint her own police with the fact that it had gone. Meanwhile, if he had any news of it, he would at once let her know. He wondered if she happened to remember the number on the back plate. He was afraid there was not the least chance of her knowing the number of the engine.

Now, however, he got help for which he had hardly hoped.

Mr. Robertson had left all the papers about the car for her to keep. So she fetched them. What she called the papers was the insurance policy.

Cousin Jack told her she must at once inform the insurance company that the car had gone.

The very word insurance made poor Stephanie feel sick at heart. It caused Lancelot's knees to tremble.

She glanced at the policy. Thank goodness, the car was insured with the Red Band.

Of course, Sir Bertram could not really have thought she could have had anything to do with its loss. But, after all that had already happened, he might think it was a strange thing that she should have been there when the car was discovered to be missing.

The policy contained all particulars of the car. The number of the engine was 1369.

"I know," said Lancelot, "why you're more anxious about the number of the engine than the number on the plate. They might have changed that."

And Stephanie said: "Lancelot, you're getting quite a detective yourself."

Lancelot was very pleased, and wondered if, after all, he would not be a detective instead of a soldier when he was grown up.

On the way home Cousin Jack told Stephanie what the next move was to be.

She leant over the back of the car, and whispered it to Lancelot.

Cousin Jack was going to put an advertisement in the *Times*, offering a reward to anyone who would furnish him

with information about a plum-coloured car with an R. on its panels, whose engine number was 1369.

Cousin Jack stopped at the nearest Post Office, telephoned the advertisement to London, and made special arrangements, on account of its urgency, for it to appear in Monday morning's issue.

Cousin Jack had originally intended to motor up to Scotland on Monday, but he now decided to wait and see if any answers came to his advertisement.

Sunday and Monday went by. The answers should arrive on Tuesday.

Nothing came on Tuesday.

Stephanie was very disappointed. She had rushed down to the gate to take the letters from the postman. Lancelot was equally disappointed when he came hurrying down directly after breakfast.

It was a wet morning, so Cousin Jack sat writing letters, and Stephanie and Mrs. Carlyon occupied themselves with dressmaking.

Lancelot had not remained at the cottage. He had gone on down the village to do some shopping for his mother.

Half-an-hour later he came rushing into the drawing-room. He was so excited that he did not stop to wipe his feet on the mat; usually he was so careful, it was a thing about which his mother was very particular.

"There was a letter," he said. "Mr. Gambol found it in the bottom of his bag when he got back. And he was going to bring it up with the post this afternoon. It must be about the car, because it's addressed to Cousin Jack" (he had become Cousin Jack to Lancelot as well as to Stephanie now). "It's got Poulton's Garage stamped on the back of the envelope."

Oh, how excited they were as Cousin Jack began to open it! "Not that I expect it's anything," he said. "Only someone asking me if I'll buy their tyres."

But when he had read the letter he did not joke any more. He grew serious. Then he read it through again.

None of the three said anything. They waited until he should tell them. They did not have to wait very long.

"Look here," he said. "Listen to this:

"'DEAR SIR,

"'I have in my garage a plum-coloured car like you describe. The number of the engine is 1369. It was brought in last night by a gentleman called Mr. Rodd. He had a lady with him. They are staying at The Greyhound.

"'Yours very truly,

"'A. POULTON.'"

"It's them," said Stephanie, "it's them. The Greens. She's the lady with him. Don't you see?"

"Yes. It's them," said Lancelot. "'Cos—— 'Cos——" He was so excited that he was stammering. "They've called themselves Rodd because—because of the letter on the panel."

"Isn't it lovely and gorgeous to have found them so quickly?" said Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon felt as excited as the children.

"It does," she said, "it really does look as though it were the Greens."

Then for the first time they thought of asking from where the letter had come.

"From Wilmington," said Cousin Jack. "The address of the garage is 95, High Street, Wilmington."

Nobody was quite sure where Wilmington was. Mrs. Carlyon thought she had heard of it. Cousin Jack sent Lancelot to fetch the Michelin Book in the pocket of the car.

By the time he was back he had looked it up.

"It's only about thirty miles from here," he said, "near Swanton."

That was, of course, how Mrs. Carlyon remembered it. She had once stayed at Swanton, and must have seen it on the signpost.

"How quickly can we go there?" asked Stephanie.

Cousin Jack thought the quicker the better. So they decided to have an early lunch, and start directly afterwards.

Lancelot ran home to ask permission to motor over to Wilmington with Cousin Jack and Stephanie. He did not tell them anything at home about the search they were making, that was a great secret.

At first Mrs. Bennett demurred. The wind was cold, and Wilmington was a long way off. Then he might get back late.

Lancelot was almost frantic. He must go. He must.

At last she said he might if he took two mufflers and his Jaeger, and a rug to put round his shoulders if it turned cold in the evening. He went off laden with them, but I am sorry to say that Lancelot, who was getting a daring rebel, as soon as he was out of his mother's sight, turned into the potting shed and stored the extra garments in a corner. He could not bear that Cousin Jack should think he was a mollycoddle.

Once again Mrs. Carlyon stood at the gate to wave off the party. She, too, felt happier now that Cousin Jack had come. There had not been such a merry lunch party as there was that day since the tapestry had disappeared. They really were quite certain now that they were on the track of the Greens.

Wilmington was a charming, old-world town. Eager as Stephanie was to get to the garage, she could not help noticing how picturesque it was. All the houses in the narrow street were old. The town stood on a hill, and below was a winding river.

It was evidently a place to which many sight-seers came. Quite a number of people were wandering through the town, stopping to look at this or that, or to consult a guide-book.

Poulton's garage was a very small affair. It was on the outskirts of the town. But directly they were inside it, Stephanie saw something that made her grip hold of Cousin Jack with one hand and tug at Lancelot with the other.

"Look. Look—that must be it, I'm sure."

Almost hidden behind a big motor lorry was a plum-coloured Wolseley car.

A cleaner came forward.

"Could I see Mr. Poulton?" asked Cousin Jack.

The man went to fetch him.

Lancelot and Stephanie were examining the Wolseley. Cousin Jack came and joined them.

"It is the one, I'm sure," said Stephanie. "Look, there's the R. on the panel."

Lancelot was climbing in behind the lorry to see the number plate. He gave a squeak of delight.

"It's X59," he said, coming back to the others.

"But Mr. Robertson's car was A72," said Stephanie.

Then Lancelot produced his great piece of news.

"Yes. But when you look into it you can see A72 has been painted out."

Then Mr. Poulton arrived. When he understood what had happened, he took them into his office and told them all he knew about the car. The three sat listening with the greatest interest. It had only come in last evening and, as he had said in his letter, it had been brought there by a Mr. Rodd, who had a lady with him.

"Do you think she'd be his sister?" asked Stephanie.

"I should think she might be."

"Was she tall and very prim?"

"That's about it," said Mr. Poulton.

"And the gentleman," said Stephanie, "was he tall too, and thin?"

"That's about it," Mr. Poulton answered. "Anyhow, you can look at them for yourselves. They're staying at The Greyhound. Come to see the sights of the town, so they tell me."

"Come to see if there is anything they can steal here, I expect," said Lancelot, who was getting quite bold in his assertions.

Mr. Poulton went with them into the street, and in-

dicated the way to The Greyhound. It lay at the bottom of the hill, overlooked the river, and stood in a garden by itself.

"That sounds like them," said Stephanie, "to choose a hotel as isolated as they can."

It was a nice hotel, and Cousin Jack decided that the Greens were doing themselves well.

Yes, they were in. Would the gentleman kindly give his name? But this did not suit Cousin Jack. If he sent in his name to the Greens, they might be off before he could get to them, because his surname too was Carlyon. He hesitated a moment. Then Stephanie came to the rescue.

"We don't want them to know we've come. We want to surprise them," she said.

The hall porter, who was a kind-hearted man with a nice sense of fun, entered into the joke at once.

"I see. You want to burst yourselves on them. All right, then." He turned to the page boy. "Take them along to sitting-room B. And just say: 'Some visitors to see you.'"

So the Greens had a private sitting-room. They were indeed doing themselves well, seeing that all their money had been lost in Brazilian Oils!

Stephanie went into the room first. Then, almost before she realized what she was saying, she called out:

"Oh, it isn't them. I—I beg your pardon," she exclaimed, remembering her manners. "They must have shown us into the wrong room. We wanted to see Mr. and Miss Rodd."

The couple who occupied the room were charming-looking people. The man, who had risen when they had come in, was a tall, well-built man of about fifty. The woman was about thirty, and was very daintily dressed, and anything but prim or stiff.

"I am Mr. Rodd," said the owner of the room, "and this is Miss Rodd. I'm afraid I cannot recollect having met you."

Poor Stephanie by now was so bewildered and overcome that she looked appealingly at Cousin Jack.

"Excuse me," said Cousin Jack, "but may I ask if you are the owner of the plum-coloured car at Poulton's Garage?"

They expected him to say that he was not. But he answered in the affirmative:

"Yes, it's my car."

Then Cousin Jack said:

"Will you forgive me for asking you yet another question? I will explain it all in a moment, and you will realize it is not mere officiousness on my part. But have you owned it long?"

"As a matter of fact I've owned it only a few days," Mr. Rodd answered. "This is Tuesday, and I bought it second-hand at a garage at Southampton on Friday."

"It was on Wednesday that it was stolen," joined in Stephanie.

"What's that?" asked Mr. Rodd. "I've bought a stolen car?"

"I'll tell you the story from the beginning," said Cousin Jack.

While he told it, Miss Rodd beckoned to Stephanie to come and sit beside her, and then she beckoned to Lancelot to sit on the other side of her. She listened intently to the story, sometimes joining in with a "Fancy" or an "Oh!" or "Well, I never." And when Cousin Jack had finished, Miss Rodd said:

"And how disappointing for you! You thought we were going to turn out to be the Greens under the name of Rodd."

Stephanie said: "I don't think Mr. Poulton gave a very good description of you. I asked him if you were prim and severe-looking, and he said 'Yes.'"

"And aren't I?" laughed Miss Rodd.

"No," said Stephanie, "you're nice and smiling."

"And gorgeously jolly," put in Lancelot, not to be out-done by Stephanie.

Miss Rodd laughed at them, and said they were a pair of

flatterers. She asked Stephanie what else Mr. Poulton had told her.

Stephanie said that he thought they might be brother and sister.

"We're not brother and sister," said Miss Rodd, "but uncle and niece."

Then Mr. Rodd turned to his niece and suggested that she should ring and ask for tea. "Tea for five, Iris," he added.

"No—no," he said, when Cousin Jack protested. "We'll tell you our part of the story over a cup of tea."

"Plenty of jam and cake," said pretty Iris Rodd to the waiter.

"And cream," added her uncle. "We've got a couple of hungry youngsters with us this afternoon."

Over tea Mr. Rodd told them all about his purchase of the car.

He had bought it at Hamilton's Garage, in Princes Road, Southampton. Directly he saw it he thought it was a bargain. The proprietor had agreed with him. He said the car had only been in the show-room for a couple of days. It had been brought in on the previous Wednesday by a couple who told him they wished to dispose of it at once, as they were unexpectedly going abroad.

That was all Mr. Rodd could tell them, but if they went to the garage at Southampton, perhaps the proprietor would be able to give them more information about the seller of the car.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

DEADLOCK

Once again Cousin Jack put off his trip to Scotland. Early next morning he went down to Southampton to make further investigations. He did not take Stephanie and Lancelot with him this time, as it might be necessary for

him to stay the night away. Indeed, as he had other business in Southampton, he decided not to return until the following afternoon.

Cousin Jack was a very kind person, and he went several miles out of his way to take the road through Fremingway.

He had something to tell Mrs. Evans, which would greatly relieve her mind.

"I have found Mr. Robertson's car," he said.

He told her how he had come across it at Wilmington, and that Mr. Rodd, the purchaser, would be over that afternoon to see her. He would not wait to hear Mrs. Evans' thanks, which were immense. She was talking long after he was out of sight.

"There, she knew the moment she set eyes on him that he was the kind of gentleman to be up and doing.

"She had been almost easy in her mind ever since he had said that he would look for the car."

Stephanie had always thought that when the day came on which she ought to have gone back to school she would have been very sad. This was the day, but she did not give it a moment's thought until the afternoon, when she had a letter from her cousin Molly.

It was a wrathful letter. The ink splashes were all over the page.

"Viola is a Beast," she wrote, and she spelt it with a capital B. "She's got all the girls on her side now. Of course, they wanted to know why you were not coming back. I told them how unlucky you had been, losing your money in Brazilian Oils, and all about your adventures with the Greens. And do you know what they said? 'More of her yarns.' They did not believe a word of it.

"But I don't care," Molly wrote on. "if I have the whole school against me. I believe in you. I always believed, and I always shall believe that Mr. MacRory did say all the things Auntie told us about your drawing."

Stephanie did not feel she minded much what the girls at school said. But she did love Molly's loyalty.

Then Lancelot made a suggestion.

"Don't you think you ought to send your letter to your cousin—I mean the one Mr. MacRory wrote you?"

"Why should I?" said Stephanie. "It doesn't matter to me what the girls believe and what they don't."

"But it would be such a triumph for Molly," said Lancelot. "Think how she would enjoy showing it to the school. And wouldn't the girls feel small!"

Still Stephanie demurred.

But Lancelot did want her to send that letter. He was as loyal to her as Molly, and though he did not know the girls at Belmont school, he could not bear to think that they were doubting Stephanie. At last he prevailed on her. Stephanie sat down and wrote a long letter to Molly, enclosing in it the letter Mr. MacRory had given Lancelot to give her.

Oh dear, time does want a lot of filling up! The day one has to get through seems an endless day. There was all the following morning to get through as well; Cousin Jack would not be back from Southampton until tea-time at the earliest.

Lancelot did not go back to school for another week, so Stephanie had his company.

They decided they would bicycle over to Ridgeway Farm, so that Lancelot could tell Mr. MacRory he had done the fair and square thing, and had confessed to Mrs. Carlyon.

But Mr. MacRory had left the farm the week before.

They were disappointed. They dawdled back through the woods, stopping to pick some blackberries, to do anything, in fact, which would make the morning go by.

Tea-time came at last. Tea-time brought Cousin Jack. They had barely sat down to tea, Mrs. Carlyon, Lancelot and Stephanie, when he arrived. He had driven up so quietly that they had not heard the motor, and he was in the room before they realized he had returned.

"Well, Jack?" said Mrs. Carlyon quickly.

"What—what?" asked Stephanie.

"Did you get them?" shouted Lancelot, looking at Cousin Jack's pockets as though he expected Miss Green to be in one and Mr. Green in the other.

Cousin Jack shook his head as he pulled up a chair, and sat down at the table.

"I am afraid they've gone out of our reach," he said. "Beck had tracked them as far as the garage at Southampton too. He was there when I arrived. He had all the facts with him and all the times and dates worked out. They sold the car at five o'clock on Wednesday afternoon. At six they sailed in the *Arania* for South Africa. What will happen to them on their arrival there one does not know. But I think they're certain to be caught."

"And when they're caught," said Lancelot, "we shall get back the tapestry."

"Oh, what a long time to wait!" sighed Mrs. Carlyon.

But Stephanie was looking serious. And Cousin Jack realized that she had gone ahead of his words.

Stephanie turned to Lancelot.

"Wasn't it at half-past four on Wednesday afternoon," she said, "that you saw the tapestry under the board in your room, and didn't you say you did not leave the room until you went downstairs, at six o'clock? Well, if the Greens sailed from Southampton at six that same afternoon, they could not possibly have taken the tapestry."

Her voice sounded tearful. Mrs. Carlyon and Lancelot did not speak. They were adjusting their minds to this new development.

"That's just it, Steph," said Cousin Jack kindly. "They're responsible all right for the fur theft and a dozen other thefts, and they may have wanted to take the tapestry, but there's absolutely clear proof they did not do so. Beck says they must have seen him behind the hedge at the Lion, and got frightened. That's why they cut away so quickly."

"Then," said Stephanie, "if the Greens did not take it, who did?"

Not one of them had an idea now who could possibly have stolen the tapestry.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

FRESH SUSPICIONS

NEXT morning poor Stephanie, feeling very dispirited and disappointed, went over to see Lancelot after breakfast.

Lancelot was upstairs in the schoolroom. Mrs. Bennett told Stephanie to run up and find him there. When Stephanie went in Lancelot was busy writing something on a piece of paper.

"What are you doing?" she asked, sitting down beside him.

Written on the top of the paper were the words: "'T isn't you—'t isn't you. But it's you."

"I'm putting down," said Lancelot, looking at it over his round glasses, "all the people who knew the tapestry was under the board in my bedroom. There are very few," he said. "There's Miss Green and Mr. Green, and perhaps the Greens' accomplice."

"What do you mean," said Stephanie, "by the Greens' accomplice?"

"Well," said Lancelot, "I've been thinking it out. And do you know what I thought?"

He spoke very slowly, as though he was weighing each word.

"That, although the Greens could not possibly have got the tapestry themselves, they might have bribed somebody to get it for them, and to keep it for them until they came back from Africa."

Stephanie thought Lancelot had been very clever to have thought of this. It was quite a likely thing to have happened.

But, oh dear, if this was the case, it would be difficult to

trace the Greens' accomplice. Lancelot said that was just what had been worrying him.

Then Stephanie thought of Mr. Beck. He had been watching the Greens for a long while. He would surely know if they had any friends, or if there was anybody in their employ whom they might have paid to help them in this matter.

"Yes," Lancelot agreed. Mr. Beck was quite a good idea.

But where could they find him?

Ellen had his address. It had been on the visiting card he had given her the day he had first called at Combe Cottage. Ellen had asked if she might keep it, for she looked on it as a souvenir of all the events that had followed.

Stephanie thought he lived somewhere in London, but they would not be able to go up and see him; and they could not even ask kind Cousin Jack to do so, because he was leaving for Scotland next evening by the night train—he had already delayed his holiday on their account.

But they could write to Mr. Beck and tell him of their latest idea. Then, if he thought that it was likely, he might come down and see them; he was always running over the country and never seemed to mind how far he had to travel.

Stephanie was saved the trouble of writing Mr. Beck a letter, for when she got home Ellen told her he had called that morning, but that, finding both Mrs. Carlyon and herself out, he had said that he would be back again in the afternoon.

Stephanie told Mrs. Carlyon at lunch of Lancelot's idea. Mrs. Carlyon quite agreed that there might be something in it. Stephanie was so enthusiastic about it that Mrs. Carlyon grew enthusiastic too. She really wondered that nobody had thought of it before. It was such a likely solution.

Mr. Beck came soon after two o'clock. Stephanie was so eager to tell him of the new idea that she burst out with it before he had time to tell them why he had come.

"You know all about the Greens," she said. "Do you think they'd have an accomplice? Because we suddenly thought they might have sent their accomplice to steal the tapestry from Lancelot's room."

But Mr. Beck was not reassuring. In fact, he extinguished the idea straight away.

"We too thought of that," he said. "But we've settled the question once and for all. Although Mr. and Miss Green were originally after the tapestry, they actually took no part whatsoever in its final disappearance. Being in this neighbourhood, I came in to tell you the story of their part of the proceedings, because I thought you might be interested to hear it."

"But how ever do you know it?" asked Stephanie.

Mr. Beck smiled importantly.

"I've been to Lisbon since I saw you last," he said.

"Oh—oh! I know what's happened," piped in Stephanie. "The *Arania* put in there, and you caught the Greens."

"Yes, we've got the Greens at last," said Mr. Beck. "They've been very clever, for they had sewn the furs and jewellery they had stolen behind the linings of their trunks, but we had set someone cleverer than they were to watch them." Mr. Beck was chuckling with delight. "She was the stewardess who waited on Miss Green. The sea was rough. That was the trouble. And when the sea is rough and you're feeling very ill, you don't stop to think about much else."

"No, you don't," agreed Stephanie, who had once suffered from sea-sickness in a fishing-boat.

"So the stewardess went to her trunk to find some brandy, and, feeling for the flask which was at the bottom of the trunk, she became aware of something soft fastened underneath the lining. So when next evening the sea was quieter, and Miss Green had gone to take the air on deck, the stewardess—who wasn't really a stewardess, but a woman detective in disguise—made investigations. The Captain wirelessed Headquarters. That's how it came about that I

went out to Lisbon. The trouble up to now has been that we have had no evidence. But here they were caught with the furs in their possession, and with many other things besides that had been missing from houses in London."

"Oh, I wish now," said Stephanie, "that they had taken the tapestry, because then we should have had it back."

"But what was the story you were going to tell us about it?" Mrs. Carlyon asked.

"The story Miss Green told me. I thought the way to find out if she had any part in it was to accuse her of the theft of it. She would be ready enough to say she had not got it if she hadn't. She did tell me, however, that it was one of the things she and her brother really meant to take. She was quite pitiful about it. It was one of their few failures. They had seen Mrs. Carlyon's advertisement in the paper, offering it for sale. That's what brought her to Combe Cottage, aided by the fact that Canon Weston should at the critical moment have mentioned you were friends of his.

"On the same night when Master Lancelot took it, her brother had planned to steal it. She left the door open for him to fetch it."

So that was why the door had been open. When Lancelot had told them how he had walked into the house they had not been able to understand it at all, because the door had been shut when Stephanie had come down in the morning and raised the alarm.

It was Miss Green who had broken the hasp and scratched the window paint, to make believe the burglars had broken in that way.

"Even when she had told me this much," Mr. Beck continued, "I egged her on still further. 'Yes, but it went afterwards. What about that now?' And she was so obviously surprised that it had gone from under the floor—as was her brother when I told him the same story—that there was no question any longer in my mind that either of them had in

any way whatsoever had anything to do with its final disappearance."

"So I am afraid," said Mrs. Carlyon, looking affectionately at her disappointed daughter, "it does away with any idea that the tapestry was taken by the Greens' accomplice. So we are once again left without any solution of the mystery."

"And I have something else to tell you," said Mr. Beck. "We found among the Greens' papers a notebook relating to the Brazilian Oil Co. There were quite a number of subscribers to it. And I don't wonder the people should have been deceived," he went on, for he noticed that Mrs. Carlyon looked rather uncomfortable, "for Mr. Green was a plausible man. However, there was no such company existing. All the money subscribed went into Mr. Green's own banking account."

"Now they're caught," said Stephanie, "do you think there's any chance of our getting it back?"

"Well," said Mr. Beck, "you never know what may happen in time. But I'm afraid it'll be some months before we can say anything definitely on the matter. It depends entirely on how Mr. Green's financial position stands when investigations have been made."

Then Cousin Jack came in. And he had to hear the story all over again.

To him the most satisfactory part of it was that there was a possibility that Mrs. Carlyon might after all see some of her money back again.

"We may not," said Mrs. Carlyon.

"You may not," Mr. Beck agreed.

"And anyway," said Stephanie, "I don't see that it much matters, because it'll take months and months, Mr. Beck says. And we've got to have the money to pay the insurance company very quickly now."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

BUT IT'S HIM

NEXT morning Cousin Jack went off for the day on private business.

Stephanie once more went to Lancelot's home. Again she found him in the schoolroom. If Mr. Beck's words had been a blow to Stephanie, hers were a bigger blow to Lancelot.

She didn't stop to say "Hullo" or anything. Out it came:—

"The Greens' accomplice is a washout."

She told Lancelot all that Mr. Beck had told her.

"So it puts us back where we were last time we were looking at your list. What other names have you on it?"

Lancelot took it out of his waistcoat pocket. He unfolded it, spread it on the table, and began to read aloud from it:

"Miss Green—'Tisn't you.

"Mr. Green—'Tisn't you.

"Mr. Green's accomplice—'Tisn't you."

"That's where we got to yesterday," said Stephanie. "Who else knew where the tapestry was hidden?"

Lancelot consulted the list again.

"Mr. MacRory."

"Well, it isn't him," said Stephanie.

"No," said Lancelot. "You can't imagine a famous artist stealing a tapestry." Then he looked up. "There's only one more person on the list," said he. "Mr. Watts."

Among Mr. Beck's discoveries had been the one that Mr. Watts had impersonated a carpenter.

"Oh," said Stephanie, "I never thought of him. But you don't think, do you, he would have done it? I don't see why he should," she thought on. "He's conceited and rude. But he does look honest."

"Well, somebody must have taken it," said Lancelot. "It didn't walk away by itself."

"No," said Stephanie.

But she was still loath to think it was Mr. Watts. His very connection with the Star Insurance Company seemed to make it so unlikely.

"Aren't there any others?"

"I can't think of anybody else," said Lancelot.

Then Stephanie said: "Let's go out of doors. I feel I can think better in the fresh air."

"All right," said Lancelot, who was always ready to do anything Stephanie wanted.

On the doorstep they met a bright-looking young man. He was in motor-cycling overalls. Neither Stephanie nor Lancelot knew him by sight.

"Is Mr. Bennett at home?" he asked.

Lancelot shook his head.

"He's never at home in the daytime."

"Is Mrs. Bennett at home?"

"Yes," said Lancelot.

He thought she was in the kitchen, and he went to find her. She was making a tart, and her arms were thick with flour.

"Ask him what he wants, Lancelot. Tell him I can't see him. If it's anybody wanting a subscription, tell them we do not give to callers at the door."

The young man was exchanging pleasantries with Stephanie when Lancelot went back. He had already remarked that it was a fine day and wonderful weather for the time of year, and the foliage looked better than he ever remembered. He was indeed a most pleasant young man.

"My mother's busy," said Lancelot. "She told me to ask you what you wanted."

"I'm from the Star Insurance Company," said the motor cyclist, "and I want to point out to you the immense advantage of insuring in the Star against insuring in any other company."

"We're insured in the Red Band," said Lancelot stiffly. "But you are not Mr. Watts," he added.

"No, I'm not Mr. Watts," said the bright young man.

"But," said Lancelot, "he always canvasses this district."

"He's had the sack from the firm," said the young man.

"What?" gasped Stephanie and Lancelot together.

"And I've been taken on in his place," said the young man. He seemed very pleased with himself, and was quite ready to tell them the facts that led to Mr. Watts' dismissal. "So overbearing in his manner, they couldn't stick him any longer. Puffed up with his own importance."

It was rather amusing this remark coming from the young man, because his whole manner suggested that he too had quite a good opinion of himself. But whereas Mr. Watts' manner had been surly this young man's was cheery.

"It was Mrs. Gregg who brought it to a head, the old lady down at Bridge Cottage. Went and insured in the Red Band. Said Mr. Watts did not treat her with courtesy. And I'm not surprised you haven't heard about Mr. Watts" —he was speaking to Lancelot, because he knew who he was, but he did not know Stephanie at all—"seeing that you were the centre of the story. He suspected when he insured the tapestry that there was going to be hanky-panky somewhere soon."

Lancelot turned rather red.

"And Sir Bertram said that he ought not to have insured it if he had suspicions like that. But he would have let that go by for once, if it had not been for Mrs. Gregg coming right on top of it.

"Of course, I was sorry for him. We were all sorry for him. But we could not help having a laugh about it. He'd got into his head he was valuable to the company. I really think he thought they would make him a director. Wouldn't hardly speak to any of us. Oh, no. Quite a lord. A bit too

free with Sir Bertram. Said a bit more, I think, than he ought to have done. Sir Bertram's a one for his dignity.

"You should have heard what he had to say about the company when he got the sack. Disgusting lot. Shameful treatment he'd received. What was the use of trying to help the directors? That was all he got for it. He would show them what they'd lost. He'd pay them out. He'd see that they suffered for the way they had treated him."

The Bright Young Man was enjoying himself. It was not often he got such an interested audience. Stephanie and Lancelot were standing each side of the doorway, drinking in everything he said.

Then Stephanie asked a question.

"When was it that Mr. Watts got the sack?"

"The Wednesday in last week."

Oh yes, the Bright Young Man remembered the day quite well.

Then, with a little more chat, and perhaps the young gentleman would tell his father when he came home how superior the Star was to any other company, he mounted his motor-cycle again and they heard him pip-pipping down the road.

Stephanie and Lancelot remained quite silent for a moment, standing on each side of the doorway. Their minds were occupied with the same thoughts. They were checking up the events of last week.

On Wednesday Mr. Watts had been given the sack, and had left with a grievance against the company.

On Wednesday afternoon Lancelot had seen the tapestry was safe. He had not looked for it again until it was found to be missing on the following Friday morning. It had either been taken Wednesday night or during Thursday. That was after Mr. Watts had been discharged.

Now Mr. Watts knew quite well that the Insurance Company would demand either the return of the money or the tapestry. He had no doubt heard from Ellen how Mrs. Carlyon's money had been lost.

"That's it," said Lancelot suddenly. He had grown so quick these last couple of weeks that he invariably put his thoughts into words before Stephanie had time to speak hers.

"He did take it. He took it to spite the Insurance Company. He took it—not stole it," Lancelot emphasized the words very carefully. "He isn't going to sell it, or anything like that for his own advantage."

"He was so mad against the directors," Stephanie burst in, "that he saw this way of avenging himself. They should neither have the tapestry nor the money. He never stopped to think what a terrible hole he would be putting us into. When you're fearfully conceited, as he is, you don't stop to think about anybody but yourself." She was sure now that Mr. Watts had taken "Stephanie's Knight Errant." "But do you know," she went on, "perhaps he isn't so bad as he looks. If we pointed out to him all it meant to us, don't you think he might give us back the tapestry, and not mind about the vengeance?"

"I think if you were to ask him, he would," said Lancelot, looking fondly at Stephanie. "Anyhow, it's worth trying."

Stephanie was very hopeful again.

After all, Mr. Watts' own words pointed so much to his having done it.

"I'll pay them back in their own coin. I'll make them suffer for having treated me so badly."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

THE PINK STUD REVIVES

The first obstacle in the way of their interview with Mr. Watts was the fact that they did not know his address. Here fortune favoured them, however. On her way back to lunch Stephanie met the Bright Young Man. He was

even more delighted with himself than he had been. He jumped off his motor-cycle when he saw her.

"I've had a grand morning," he said. "Mrs. Gregg has promised to reconsider, and insure with us after all. And I've persuaded five other people to take out policies who have never taken them out before."

Then she said:

"Could you tell me where Mr. Watts lives?"

"15, Bishop's Place, Midbury," promptly answered the Bright Young Man. He was so bright that he at once supplied a reason why Stephanie should need it. "You want to go and tell him you're sorry he's lost his job. You feel it's your fault. But I shouldn't be too sorry, or it'll make him more conceited."

Stephanie did not tell Mrs. Carlyon anything about the latest suspicions. She was looking forward to returning that evening and telling her mother: "We've got back the tapestry. Mr. Watts was so nice about it, we made him realize how mean he'd be to try and spite the company, and when he saw what a difference it was going to make to us, he gave it back at once."

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" said Mrs. Carlyon.

"I'm going back to Lancelot."

Mrs. Carlyon laughed.

"Absolute pair of inseparables, aren't you?"

Lancelot was delighted that Stephanie had got the address. He knew where Bishop's Place was. Just before you came into the town. They decided to go in by the four o'clock 'bus, it would be quicker than cycling.

Mr. Watts' villa was the gayest-looking in the row. The curtains were yellow net, and there were scarlet geraniums in the front border.

But Mrs. Watts did not look as smart as the house. She came to the door with her sleeves rolled up, her hair in curlers and her face very red.

Her husband was not in yet. If the young lady and

gentleman wanted to see him, they could wait if they liked. But they must excuse her, as she was washing. Of course, it was late in the day to be washing, but she had been detained in the morning. She showed them into the front room, resplendent with green plush chairs.

About half-an-hour later Mr. Watts came in. They heard Mrs. Watts calling to him from the back quarters.

"There's a boy and girl in the front room waiting for you."

They expected to see a very crushed Mr. Watts coming into the room. Of course, it was very disappointing to lose your job, especially as you expected to do so well in it. But Mr. Watts was more bumptious than ever.

To the surprise of both of them, he seized hold of Lancelot's hand, and shook it warmly.

"I have to thank you, young man, for getting me a fine job."

"Me—me—I—I—?" said Lancelot.

"Him?" gasped Stephanie.

"Yes. If he had not made off with the tapestry, I should not have got the sack from the rotten Star show. I was pretty angry with the company. I mean, as I told Sir Bertram, I did not mind for myself. It was for them I was sorry. Throwing away a man of enterprise as he was doing. They'll be sorry now. Oh, they'll be sorry now. I've got a fine berth with the Red Band. I'm going to make it my business to see that the Red Band gets all the business from the Star. They know what they've got. I think they appreciate that something valuable's come their way. As I said before, and as I told Sir Bertram himself, I'll pay them back in their own coin. I never expected to get a job like this. Got it this morning—only this morning."

"Then," said Stephanie, "now you've got the job and you can avenge yourself on the Star by taking their business to the Red Band, that'll be enough, won't it, to satisfy you?"

"Enough? More than enough," said the enchanted Mr. Watts.

"Well, if it's more than enough, won't you give us back the tapestry?"

"Give you back the tapestry?" said Mr. Watts, sitting on the edge of the table, and pushing out his feet shod in elegant brown shoes.

"Yes," said Stephanie. "It means such a lot to us, getting it back. It was terrible for us it going like that a second time. Sir Bertram had been quite kind till that happened. He had realized it had all been a mistake, that Lancelot had not meant any harm. When it went like that for the second time, we could all see they were suspicious of us, and began to wonder if, after all, it wasn't hanky-panky all through. I really believe he thought Mummie had put the idea the first time into Lancelot's head. And it was she who had got rid of it the second time."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Watts. "That's so like the company. As if anyone, knowing they were under suspicion, would have dared to take it. The person who took that tapestry, mark my words, is somebody whom nobody has suspected yet."

"Not nobody," said Lancelot, quite regardless of his grammar. "Because he has been suspected, but only by us both."

"We have not mentioned it to a soul, we promise you," said Stephanie. "And if you'll only give us back the tapestry, we won't tell anyone—I mean except Mummie, because we'll have to tell her, but she's as safe as houses—that you took it to punish the company."

Mr. Watts sprang clean off the table. He looked from one to the other.

"I don't know what on earth you mean," he said.

He was trying to put them off. But Stephanie was not going to be put off.

"We quite understand your point of view, Mr. Watts. You knew where the tapestry was hidden—you'd been clever enough to find out."

Mr. Watts swallowed this.

"Yes—Yes. I think I was pretty smart about that."

"So when you were sacked by your company, you said to yourself: 'I'll pay them back in their own coin.'"

"I did," Mr. Watts allowed.

"'Mrs. Carlyon,'" went on Stephanie, making up the words she imagined Mr. Watts had spoken, "'can't pay the money. Mr. Bennett would like to pay it for her, but he can't sell his house, and he hasn't any money if he doesn't. If I take the tapestry, they won't get anything at all.'"

"That wasn't too bad an idea," said Mr. Watts. "Yes, I might have paid them out like that. But I never thought of such a thing."

There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice.

Stephanie saw hope slipping away again. Her mouth quivered. It was Lancelot who put the question directly.

"Then you haven't got the tapestry?"

"No," said Mr. Watts. "I've never set eyes on the tapestry since I saw it rolled up under the board I went to mend in your bedroom. And the cheek of that Sir Bertram grumbling about my going into your house disguised. Said the employees of a first-class insurance company did not go dressing up. But I'll pay them out yet. I've been down to Mrs. Gregg this afternoon, and I've made her take back I'm an unpleasant young man. I've told her I've gone over to the Red Band now, and what a much finer company it is than the Star. And she's promised me she'll take no more policies from the Star, but she'll insure with us."

Mr. Watts swelled with pride as he spoke the "us."

But Stephanie and Lancelot were not interested in Mr. Watts' achievements. They were back where they were that morning. There was no hope now of getting news of the tapestry.

"I suppose," said Stephanie, "you haven't the least idea who might have taken it?"

Mr. Watts shook his head.

"No. But, as I said before, I expect it'll turn out to be the person you least suspect."

"I—I wonder if you would help us," said Lancelot.

And he gave Mr. Watts a little more of the praise which was so very precious to him.

"Because you were so clever in finding out it was I who took it first of all."

"Yes," said Stephanie. "Whatever was it that made you suspect it was under the board in Lancelot's room?"

"I thought it out all myself," said Mr. Watts. "Quite myself. I had a chat with that Miss Green. Between ourselves, I had a feeling from the first that she was not what she seemed. She gave me a pink collar stud. She had picked it up in the passage. And I said to myself: 'You find the owner of that pink stud, and you've got the chap who was in this house that night.' I kept my eyes open," said Mr. Watts, "and took notice that old Mr. Dyer had got cards of pink studs in his window. So I set myself to make investigations. To cut a long story short, there had been two sets sold in the month. One—well, there's no importance to that set. That was sold out of the shop by a cousin over from Cardiff. It was that second set that gave away the secret. Mr. Dyer told me."—Mr. Watts' voice grew mysterious—"he had sold it"—he was speaking to Stephanie now—"to that young gentleman there. So I says to myself: 'Note that. A set of pink studs was sold to Master Lancelot Bennett.' And then, on top of that, Mr. Dyer goes telling me how he met that young man there out late at night with a roll of carpet under his arm. And I says to myself: 'That was no carpet. That was the tapestry.' Then——"

Mr. Watts went on to tell them by what means he had discovered the whereabouts of the tapestry.

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Lancelot—"what the pink stud had to do with the story?"

"Why, it helped to identify you," said Mr. Watts, who found Lancelot rather foolish. "The person who had lost that pink stud had bought that pink stud. You bought the pink stud. Well——" Mr. Watts gesticulated with his hands.

"But I never lost a pink stud," said Lancelot.

"Go on," said Mr. Watts. "How many studs did you buy?"

"Three," said Lancelot.

"And did you wear them all three in your shirt?"

"Yes," said Lancelot.

"And when you got home that night—I mean the night you took the tapestry—did you still have the three studs in your shirt? Look here—I know you found one missing. And that's the one that I've got."

Mr. Watts put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a pink bone stud.

"I did not find one missing," said Lancelot. "I've never lost one. I've got all three now."

He lifted his tie and opened his waistcoat, and Mr. Watts counted one, two, three. There was no doubt about it. Three studs were there.

"And they're the only three pink studs I have ever had," said Lancelot. "So I couldn't have lost one, and still had three."

While Mr. Watts and Lancelot had been arguing about the pink stud, Stephanie had been thinking. Somebody else had dropped a pink stud. Who could that have been?

Although she had been thinking, a second later Lancelot answered her question.

"It must have been the fellow with the pink stud who got into the house when Miss Green left the door open for her brother."

"Good gracious," said Stephanie, "then there were three people after the tapestry that night. You, who really took it, Mr. Green, who came and found it gone, and an unknown person, who also came and found it gone, who left——"

"Got it—got it," put in Mr. Watts, who could not bear to be out of the conversation for long—"for his visiting card a pink stud."

"We know," said Stephanie, "that the Greens, having

failed that night, tried again to get it, but were frustrated by your bilious attack. Don't you think then that it was more than likely that the man with the pink stud tried again, and not only tried but this time succeeded?"

"That was just what I was saying," said Mr. Watts, who was getting annoyed that Stephanie was talking so much. "That's the man. That's the man. You've got to find the man with two pink studs instead of three, and you've got him. That will show Sir Bertram and his lot that I was right when I said a person under suspicion is not the person who commits the next theft."

"But how can we find the man with two pink studs instead of three?"

For once Mr. Watts really did make a useful suggestion. He reminded them that a second card of studs had been sold from Mr. Dyer's shop, that it had been sold by the cousin from Cardiff. He advised them to go to Mr. Dyer and ask him to get all the information he could as to the purchase of those studs.

They all parted the best of friends.

He wished them luck.

Mr. Watts was as anxious now that they should find the real thief as he had been before to connect Mrs. Carlyon with the disappearance of the tapestry. And he said, seeing the shabby treatment they also had received from the Star, he hoped that when they recovered the lost property, they would insure it in the Red Band. He drew himself up in a businesslike way, bowed from the waist, and assured Stephanie that he personally would arrange that they should have the very best of terms.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

KIND COUSIN JACK

STEPHANIE had told Lancelot that she was not going to tell her mother anything about their interview with Mr. Watts.

When they got down from the 'bus at Combe bridge, she met Mrs. Carylon coming out of the post office; to Lancelot's surprise he heard Stephanie regaling her with the whole story. Well, perhaps he was not so very much surprised, after all, because he had often heard her say before that she would not tell a thing, and had then found her doing so. She could not resist it.

"Now, Mummie," said Stephanie, "we're going to Mr. Dyer's shop, and we're going to ask him to write straight off to Cardiff for us, and get Elsie to tell us all she can remember about the purchaser to whom she sold the pink studs. Will you come with us?"

Mrs. Carlyon shook her head.

"No, I think you'd better go yourselves. Perhaps I should spoil your interview. And you plucky people have managed so well yourselves up to the present. I'll wait for you out here."

Mrs. Carlyon sat on the parapet of the stone bridge, and watched the ducks swimming in a long line up the stream.

She hoped that this time Stephanie and Lancelot would find out something really satisfactory. They worked so indefatigably, she felt even more sorry for them every time they had a disappointment than she did for herself.

Amelia was out for the afternoon, so Mr. Dyer was in charge of the shop. The moment he caught sight of Lancelot, he began to tease him.

"Well, have you been out late after any more apples, young man?" He did not give Lancelot time to reply. "I know what you've come to buy. Pink studs. That's it. Very fetching, them pink studs."

Even though Lancelot was much braver than he had

been, he was not fond of being teased. Mr. Dyer's facetious manner frightened him, and he did not know what to say.

Stephanie had no difficulty in carrying on the conversation.

"We haven't come to buy pink studs," she said. "We've come to ask about them. Do you remember Mr. Watts, the insurance agent, coming here not very long ago to ask if you remembered to whom you had sold pink studs? And your telling him that you had sold one set to Lancelot, and the other set you could not say who had bought, because it had been sold while Amelia was away, by your niece Elsie from Cardiff?"

"Yes—yes. I remember the young man coming in and wasting my time." Mr. Dyer was rather testy this afternoon. "And here are you coming and wasting my time. Why should you come in and waste my time? Why should you expect me to remember everyone who buys things in my shop?"

Stephanie thought it was indeed unfortunate that it was one of Mr. Dyer's bad afternoons. Still, the only thing to do was not to notice he was cross. So she stood her ground and continued with the business that had brought her to the shop.

Lancelot, who was quite overcome by Mr. Dyer's ill humour, and who, if he had been alone, would have gone out from the shop to return on a more propitious occasion, admired greatly the way she stood up to Mr. Dyer.

She tried to coax Mr. Dyer.

"I want you to do something for me, please," she said. "It's very important, and it'll make a tremendous difference to my happiness."

"Who wants you to be happy?" said Mr. Dyer. "I'm not happy. Why should anyone else want to be happy?"

This was too much for Lancelot.

"You ought to want Stephanie to be happy," he said, "because Stephanie's so good to everyone."

"You're a nice one to talk about making her happy,"

said Mr. Dyer. "Taking the tapestry, and causing all the trouble. To say nothing of all my time you've wasted with your questions, who's bought this and who's bought that."

Still Stephanie persevered.

"I do want you very much," she said, "to write a letter to your niece in Cardiff."

"I'm not going to write her a letter."

"Well," said Stephanie, "if you give me her address, couldn't I write her a letter?"

"Why should you write her a letter? Letters take time to write. Waste of time writing her a letter."

"It wouldn't be waste of time," said Stephanie, "because, you see, there's something I want to ask her very much. I want her to tell me if she remembers who bought the other card of pink studs."

"It would be waste of time writing her a letter," growled Mr. Dyer.

And, before Stephanie could open her mouth to speak again, he had repeated his assertion:

"I tell you it would be waste of time writing her a letter. What's the use of writing anyone a letter, getting out the notepaper and the envelope and the pen and the ink, and paying for a stamp, when you might just as well ask them what you want to know?"

He opened the door at the back of the shop.

"Come out of that, Elsie," he said, and to Stephanie's and Lancelot's surprise, Mr. Dyer's niece Elsie came out from the inner room.

"I didn't know you were here," said Stephanie.

"Why should you know?" grunted Mr. Dyer.

Then, much to Stephanie's and Lancelot's relief, Mr. Dyer betook himself into the inner room, and left them alone with Elsie, who was very friendly, and not at all cross like her uncle.

She knew Stephanie and Lancelot, because they had often made purchases from her when she had taken Amelia's place.

Yes, yes. She did recollect selling a set of pink studs out of the window to a gentleman.

Yes, yes. She was quite sure it was a gentleman—— Now, was it a lady? No. She would have been quite sure to have remembered if it had been a lady. She would have thought it a funny thing for her to buy.

Elsie was so eager to help them. But Elsie was so vague.

One minute it was a fat gentleman. Yes. She was sure it was a fat gentleman. Then the next minute he was not fat. He was thin. And he'd got a moustache. No, maybe he hadn't.

By the time she had contradicted herself over and over again, and given a dozen different descriptions of the purchaser of the studs, Stephanie and Lancelot came to the regretful conclusion that Elsie from Cardiff had not the least idea to whom she had sold the studs.

"It was most disappointing," said Stephanie, when she got outside the shop.

"Yes," said Lancelot, "because she was the only person who could give us a description."

Stephanie was very gloomy.

"Even if she had given us a description, I don't suppose it would have been anywhere near right. Do you remember the man at Poulton's garage? He described Mr. and Miss Rodd to us, and though he remembered them quite well, it was all wrong. Isn't it funny how little people really remember about people they have seen?"

Mrs. Carlyon was waving to them from the bridge.

"Stuck again," said Stephanie, sitting down on one side of her.

"Elsie was there," said Lancelot, sitting down on the other side.

"And she doesn't remember," Stephanie went on, "anything about who bought the studs."

They were still sitting on the bridge when Cousin Jack arrived back in Combe.

They did not see him, but his eye was attracted by the silent little line looking into the water.

He stopped his car, jumped out of it, and came up behind them. He was in splendid spirits. He perched himself on the wall the further side of Stephanie. There were four of them now looking down into the water.

"We've had more disappointments to-day," said Stephanie. "We thought it was Mr. Watts, and went and told him so. But it wasn't."

"Only we did learn something," Lancelot went on, "from going to see Mr. Watts."

Then they told Cousin Jack how they believed yet a third midnight visitor had walked into Combe Cottage that night—was it really only six months ago? It seemed years and years to Stephanie—and he had left behind him a pink collar stud.

"Well," said Cousin Jack, "it seems as though the only chance of finding the thief will be for us all to walk about with our eyes fixed on everybody's shirt front. When we see somebody wearing two pink studs, and the third of a different colour, we'll know that we've got him."

Lancelot, who was literal-minded, took heed of this. He would make it his object in life henceforward to study the shirt fronts of every man or boy he met.

"One day," said Stephanie, "we may come across him. Who can tell? But I don't suppose it'll be in the next week. It isn't likely. I mean, why should we find out in a week who has taken the tapestry, when we haven't all this time?"

"You've got six months in which to find out," said Cousin Jack.

"What ever do you mean?" said Mrs. Carlyon.

Then Cousin Jack told them what had been keeping him busy all the day. When he had heard that the Brazilian Oil Company had been exposed as a fraud, he had decided to go himself to the insurance office and see if he could not induce the directors to allow an extension of time.

At first Sir Bertram would not hear of it. He had had

quite enough trouble over the affair already. He was tired of it. But Cousin Jack had persisted. At last Sir Bertram had reluctantly consented to consult with the other directors.

This did not quite fit in with Cousin Jack's idea. He did not think that Sir Bertram would plead the cause of Mrs. Carlyon very full-heartedly. Could he not see the other directors?

Then it was that Sir Bertram had let slip that they were coming to the office that afternoon.

Cousin Jack had prevailed. He might put his request to the directors. He had put it so effectively that after a great deal of humming and hawing, the directors had decided that, in view of the possibility of Mrs. Carlyon getting back some of her money, owing to the exposure of the Brazilian Oil fraud, they would allow her six months' grace. But not a day longer. Six months from that day the money must be paid to the insurance company, together with the interest that would then have accumulated on it.

Cousin Jack was so afraid that they were going to thank him, that he jumped off the bridge and into his car, and it was not until he was half-way home that he remembered he had left the others to walk back!

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

AUNT MARY'S OFFER

A MONTH went by. The police were still hunting for the tapestry thief. Stephanie seemed to have lost all interest now in the search. Mrs. Carlyon was quite anxious about her. She had grown very nervy and lethargic, which was not like her, she was usually so eager about everything. Lancelot had gone back to school, and Stephanie missed his companionship.

The adventure through which he had passed during the

last holidays seemed to have made quite a different boy of him, for Mr. Bennett received better accounts of him from his Housemaster than he had ever done before.

He was showing more interest in the school's activities, and promised to become quite a useful back at football.

The only lapse that he had had was one day in the middle of the match when he had suddenly left his position in the field and hopped over the boundary hedge to follow a tradesman. When he had been asked to explain his unusual behaviour, he had said:

"I thought he had a pink stud. I'm looking for a man with a pink stud."

Mr. Bennett was not alarmed at Lancelot's lapse. He knew all about the pink stud, and how he had made up his mind to try and find the man who had bought the second card of studs. There was complete confidence between the father and son now. Mr. Bennett could not help hoping that perhaps his son would be lucky and find the thief.

At all events there was six months' grace now. Perhaps before then he would have found a purchaser for the house.

Stephanie had gone back to her lessons with the Vicar. He too was distressed about her mood. Only the day before he had come down to see Mrs. Carlyon.

"She does not seem to take an interest in anything," he had told her mother. "I can't even get her to be keen about her drawing. And when Mr. MacRory has given such a wonderful opinion of her work, it does seem a pity to see her letting everything slip by like this."

Stephanie was out when the afternoon post arrived. There were two letters. Both bore the Kensington post-mark.

One was from Aunt Mary, addressed to her mother. The other was from Molly, and was for Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon laid Stephanie's letter on the table, and sat down in a chair by the window to read the one from her sister.

There was something of special interest in the letter. She

read it through once, then she laid it down on her lap. Then she read it through again.

A few days ago Aunt Mary had been to see Miss Talbot. She had been anxious to know how Molly was getting on, and what particular talents she was showing.

"Miss Talbot always gives you a straight opinion," Aunt Mary wrote. "That's why I went to see her. She never pretends your child is clever if she is not. She told me Molly was doing very nicely, and was quite average for her age. So I said: 'You mean she is just mediocre, and not exceptionally clever?' And Miss Talbot answered: 'I can't say she's exceptionally clever. But I will tell you who is really clever, and that is your niece Stephanie. The odd thing about it is that, while she was with me, we found her brilliantly clever in everything except the one thing in which she was supposed to excel. She was less strong in drawing than in any other subject.'"

Aunt Mary wrote pages of all that Miss Talbot had said about Stephanie.

She had prophesied that if only a piece of ill-luck had not taken her from school, she would in course of time have carried everything before her, and probably have won a scholarship at the end of her school career for a University.

Then Aunt Mary made a suggestion. It seemed a shame that Stephanie should not have her chance. She wanted her sister to let her have Stephanie back, and to be allowed to be responsible for her education. She begged very hard for this. Miss Talbot would take her back at half-term. Couldn't Stephanie come to her next week?

Then the Vicar came again to bring back a book which Mrs. Carlyon had lent him. She read him Aunt Mary's letter.

"I'm proud," she said, "and I can't bear to think of anyone helping to educate my girl. But I don't want to stand in Stephanie's light."

Mr. Rowe said he quite understood Mrs. Carlyon's point

of view, but he thought this very kind offer was providential at the moment. Apart from everything else, the change of surroundings would be beneficial to Stephanie. She would forget all the worries of the last weeks and the undue stress she had experienced.

When Mr. Rowe had gone, Mrs. Carlyon took Aunt Mary's letter upstairs to answer. It was very good of her to have made such a generous offer, and Mrs. Carlyon wanted her to understand how immensely she appreciated it, and how gladly she accepted it for Stephanie's sake.

While she was writing to Aunt Mary, Stephanie came in. She looked very pale and there were black rings round her eyes. She saw Molly's letter, and sat down to read it.

Molly's letter had nothing to do with Aunt Mary's offer to Mrs. Carlyon. Molly knew nothing of the visit to Miss Talbot.

Her letter was full of indignation. The girls at school were beasts—beasts. They were worse than she had believed they could be. When Stephanie had sent her on Mr. MacRory's letter, she had taken it in triumph to show the girls in her form. When they had first read it they were impressed, and one or two who had liked Stephanie, but had been too much afraid of Viola's noisy tongue to stand up to her in the past, plucked up courage to say: "So you see, after all, he did say it about her." And almost all the form had come over to Molly's side, and Viola found herself in Coventry. Then yesterday morning in Recreation, Viola had come to her and said: "So much for your cousin's letter. I know how she got it now. She wrote it herself, or got somebody to write it for her. Mr. MacRory never wrote it at all." "And I can't think," Molly went on, "what made her act like this. The awful thing about it was all the girls were on her side again. But I stood up for you, and I said you were the straightest person in the world, and you never would do such a thing. And if you had written down anything anybody had said about you, you were more likely to make it bad than good, because you were

one of those people who never thought you could do anything at all.

"But I can't help thinking Viola must have got something up her sleeve, because she could scarcely have got all the girls to back her up again if it had not been for some sort of reason, but I could not find out from her what it was.

"All she kept saying was: 'I've got a very good reason for knowing that it is quite impossible Mr. MacRory could have written that letter himself.'"

Then there was a good deal more denouncing of that awful Viola by Molly, before she ended the letter, "Your ever loving Cousin, Molly."

Poor Stephanie felt miserable.

How dared Viola say she had written the letter herself? How dared she make all the other girls believe she could have done such a thing?

She got hot and angry about it. Then her anger passed away. What did it matter what the girls said or thought about her? She would never see any of them again. One day perhaps it would all come right. Even if it didn't—— She went back to the same argument—what did it matter? She knew herself that Mr. MacRory had praised her, and that he had written the letter. It was not as if she was going back to the school. She really felt thankful now that she had left Belmont House.

The door opened, and Mrs. Carlyon came in. She put her hands on Stephanie's shoulders.

"I've got a nice surprise for you," she said. "I've had a letter from your Aunt Mary. And do you know what she's most generously offered to do? Why, she's asked me to allow you to go and live with her, and she's going to send you back to Belmont School at her own expense. She wants you to go next week, so that you can start off at the half-term."

To Mrs. Carlyon's surprise, Stephanie burst into a flood of tears.

"You'll say no. You won't send me back?" she sobbed.

Mrs. Carlyon was annoyed with Stephanie. It was ridiculous of her to behave like this when such an opportunity had been offered her. The Vicar was quite right, the change of surroundings would be beneficial. She was thoroughly overstrung. Regular school discipline was what she needed. So she said firmly:

"It's no good your arguing with me, Stephanie. I have quite decided to accept your Aunt's exceedingly generous offer, and I expect you to stop crying and behaving like a baby, and to write a nice letter to thank her, and tell her how much you are looking forward to going back to school, and that you will be with her next week."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH

IN THE GYM.

NEXT afternoon Aunt Mary received Mrs. Carlyon's grateful letter of thanks, and a nice little letter from Stephanie, saying how very good she thought it was of her aunt to have been so generous towards her. Stephanie did not say she was looking forward to coming back to school, but Aunt Mary never noticed that she had omitted to do so.

Aunt Mary felt very happy that everything had been settled so satisfactorily. She told Molly at tea-time, who was delighted.

"I do hope," she said, "the girls will behave decently."

"What do you mean?" asked her mother.

Molly told her how disbelieving they were, and how Viola had got the form under her control and made them believe that Stephanie was a story-teller.

Aunt Mary was most indignant. Of course, she could not do anything. She was wise enough to realize that any troubles among the girls must be settled by the girls themselves. Then Aunt Mary forgot all about the internal

squabbles. After all, children were always having disagreements, and it was more important at the moment to see that Stephanie's bed was aired. Did Molly remember Stephanie's favourite pudding? Yes, trifle. Very well, then, they would have trifle for dinner.

The following morning at school Molly took her mother's advice.

Viola had already heard that Stephanie was coming back at half-term, and she was not at all pleased. Since Stephanie had left, she had been head of the form. It was likely that when Stephanie came back she would be pushed down. So when in Recreation Molly went to her, and asked if she would be nice to Stephanie, and ask the other girls to be nice too, because she had such influence among them, Viola refused to make any promises. It depended entirely on Stephanie's behaviour, how she was treated. She would not say anything more, but went off tossing her head to join her two special chums, Olive and Betty, who were waiting for her by the oak tree. Molly saw them nodding and putting their heads together, and she had an idea that whatever was happening was not for Stephanie's happiness.

When they were putting on their hats to go home at lunch-time, Viola beckoned to Molly to come and speak to her.

"Cheek," thought Molly to herself. "Why should I have to go and speak to Viola? Why shouldn't Viola come and speak to me?"

But even she was a little bit afraid of her dominance. So she went across to her, and made no comment.

"Look here," said Viola, "you asked me if I would be nice to Stephanie when she comes back, and if I'd ask the others to be nice too. Well, we are prepared to be nice to Stephanie."

"Oh, I am glad," said Molly quickly.

"But there's an 'if' in it," said Viola. "If Stephanie will be honest, and own up that she invented the whole story of what Mr. MacRory said, and say the letter is not

genuine, we'll forgive her, and start afresh. There, I call that a very fair offer."

"I call it the meanest thing I've ever heard," said Molly.

"It will be a great deal better for her if you advise her to do so," said Viola.

"I shan't advise her to do anything of the kind," Molly retorted.

Poor Molly was worried as to what to do for the best. She wondered if she ought to tell Stephanie what Viola had said. If she knew, it would be so dreadful for her going back to school next day. Perhaps Viola did not mean what she said. She had only been threatening things to show her own importance.

So in the end Molly did not say a word to Stephanie, and Stephanie did not tell Molly how she disliked the thought of the following day.

It was a quarter to nine. They left the flat for the school. The nearer they came to it, the more unhappy Stephanie felt.

Molly did not feel very comfortable either. Perhaps she had been a coward. Perhaps she ought to have told Stephanie. When they turned the corner of the road in which the school was situated, she touched Stephanie on the arm.

"If you find they don't believe you, you will know I always shall," she said in little jerky abrupt sentences.

Stephanie thought she was referring to what she had written in the letter. Poor Stephanie had hoped against hope that perhaps the girls, even in the last few days, might have changed their opinion of her, but from Molly's manner it did not look as though they had done so.

The girls in her form did not receive her with any enthusiasm. One or two did not speak to her.

Kathleen Brown said "Good morning," and passed on.

"So you've come back," said Olive Slogan.

Viola was moderately nice. She came across the room to speak to her.

"Look here," she said, "we've made up our minds to

"WE ARE READY TO BE NICE TO YOU IF YOU'LL OWN UP TO ONE THING"

give you a fair chance. We shall be 'Recking' in the gym. to-day. I've got something to say to you on behalf of the form. So will you be there at eleven?"

Poor Stephanie put the best construction on this overture of Viola's. They were sorry. They were going to tell her they had misjudged her. She was almost cheerful during the first two hours of her return to school. The mistresses were really nice to her, and seemed glad to have her back.

In the middle of the morning Miss Talbot sent for her. She was very kind, and gave her such hope and encouragement for the future, that Stephanie came away feeling that, after all, it was rather nice to have come back to school.

But alas, poor Stephanie's pleasure was not to be left to her long.

When she returned from her interview with Miss Talbot, the form room was empty, for the bell for "Rec." had rung. She went along to the gymnasium.

Her form had foregathered in the corner by the horizontal bars. There were fourteen girls in the form, besides herself. They were sitting round stiffly on benches. Viola was perched on a stool. A vacant seat had been left in the middle of a bench.

"Sit down," commanded Viola.

Stephanie felt as though she were going to undergo some sort of Inquisition.

She sat down. Indeed, she would not have had the courage to do anything else if she had wanted to do so.

"Now," said Viola, "you've come back to school, and are prepared to make a fresh start. We are ready to be nice to you, to let everything that's past be forgotten, if you'll own up to one thing. That letter you sent Molly to show us, and which you said Mr. MacRory had written you —well, we don't believe he ever wrote that letter. If you will tell us the truth and say that he never did write it, but that you got some friend to concoct it to deceive us, we'll forgive you all the tales you've told us."

Stephanie was so angry that she found her voice. She was no longer the meek little mouse she had felt when she came into the gymnasium and sat down on the seat. She stood up, and her manner was defiant. Molly, watching from the further end of the gymnasium, had never seen her defiant like this before, and she admired her cousin.

"I don't want you to forgive me. I've got nothing for you to forgive. I've never made up a story in my life. Mr. MacRory did write that letter. And I'd be telling an untruth if I said I asked a friend to concoct it for me. You can believe me or not if you like. I don't care what you do."

"You'll be very unwise," said Viola, "if you insist he wrote that letter, because, as I told you before, I have a very good reason to know he did not."

"Tell me the reason," said Stephanie.

"Look here"—Viola spoke with a tinge of sincerity. "I really don't want to be unbearably nasty, so I'm going to give you this tip. I do know, I really *do* know that he did not write that letter, and I've got jolly good evidence to prove it."

Still Stephanie refused.

"Very well, then," said Viola. Then she produced her piece of evidence. All the girls in the form knew what it was.

The evidence was a cutting from the *Daily Echo*, which announced that three days previously Mr. MacRory, the world's greatest painter, had returned from a stay of nearly six months in Africa.

"I see what you're thinking," said Stephanie, whose brain was working quickly. "He's been away six months, so he could not have told me the things he did. If you think that's true you're wrong," she cried triumphantly, "because it was seven months ago I first met him. And if you don't believe me, you can add up the months yourself. It was in Christmas term I first came to school, and according to that paper, six months ago would have been September. So you see I met him just before he went."

And Viola, who had not made such a careful calculation as Stephanie, had to agree that Stephanie was right, that on this point her evidence came to grief.

"Yes," she said. "But that's not the important part of the story. I've got the letter he wrote you here." She had it tucked up her jumper sleeve, and she pulled it out with a flourish. "The date on it is January 3rd, and the address is Ridgeway Farm, Ridgeway, Devon. Yet he only arrived back from Africa three days ago. So it's quite impossible he could have been in Devon and written you a letter on the date given on it."

"But he did," said Stephanie. "He did. He was in Devon in January. The papers are wrong. Papers are often wrong," she went on, talking eagerly. "Why, he said so himself. You see, it wasn't very long before I saw him in Devonshire that I had read in the paper he was in Africa. He had come home much earlier than he had intended. He told Lancelot so. Lancelot's my boy friend, who believes in me, and knows all I say is true."

"And I believe in you too," said Molly, who had drawn nearer to the circle, and had overheard the last remark.

One or two of the girls were beginning to waver. Stephanie sounded so very emphatic. Could they be misjudging her? But they wouldn't have dared say so, for fear of angering Viola.

"He told Lancelot," Stephanie went on, "that he had come home to do a secret commission; and that he wanted to avoid the papers, because they always sent reporters to worry him with questions. So he had slipped down to Devon, leaving them to think that he was still in Africa."

Some of the girls began to believe in Stephanie.

Olive Slogan made a great effort and plucked up a tiny scrap of courage.

"That might explain," she said, "this paragraph. It might be all wrong, like the others he mentioned to Stephanie's boy friend."

Viola could not bear to see the girls wavering.

By the end of recreation the form was divided, half was on Viola's side, and half on Stephanie's.

All through the remainder of the day Viola puzzled what to do next. She was quite sure that Stephanie was inventing. How she wished that the chance meeting she had once had with Mr. MacRory might have been now; then she would have been able to take better advantage of it. Because, of course, that was quite the most decisive way of finding out—to ask him himself.

Viola wanted the chance to meet Mr. MacRory again. It was given to her.

Two days later, Miss Talbot told the girls that she had an interesting announcement to make to them after Prayers.

They wondered what it could be. It was this:—

Mr. Andrews was unable to give his promised Art lecture on the following Wednesday afternoon. But he had been fortunate enough to persuade Mr. MacRory to replace him, which was a stroke of good luck for the school, for he feared he would not now be missed, but that the girls would hail his unfortunate attack of influenza as a heaven-sent blessing, since it would give them the opportunity of being addressed by the famous Scottish artist.

Miss Talbot smiled at Stephanie.

"I am sure this announcement will be of particular interest to you," she said.

Miss Talbot, of course, was referring to the artist's interest in her. But there was another reason why the visit was of particular interest to Stephanie.

Mr. MacRory was coming to the school. There would no longer be any doubt as to the truth of her statements. She was so excited about this forthcoming visit, and in such good spirits about it, that all the form went over to her side, for surely if he had not said the things, Stephanie would have been in a funk about meeting him.

It was Viola who now found herself being sent to Coventry. She could not have believed that the girls would have turned like this.

She grew more and more disagreeable.

"It's all very well to pretend to be excited," she said. "That's quite easy. But wait till the moment arrives, and she meets Mr. MacRory face to face. But then she won't," she added quickly.

"And why not?" put in Molly.

"Stephanie will take care," said Viola, "that they don't meet. I think it will be a headache," she suggested with a sneer, "or some slight indisposition. Oh dear, it will be very disappointing to be kept away, just on the very day her dear Mr. MacRory is here. Just one more bit of ill-luck for her."

The girls decided that Viola was horrible, that she had grown so jealous that she really did not know what she was saying.

They were nicer and nicer to Stephanie. The fact that the girls were nice to her, that she had again reached the top of the form, and that Mr. MacRory was coming on Thursday, made her feel so happy and contented that Viola's sneers and accusations no longer depressed her. Every day she went back to the flat in the best of spirits.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

THE PINK STUD CLUB

Meanwhile Lancelot, from being one of the most unpopular boys at school, had grown into one of the most popular. His lapse in the football field the day he had leapt over the boundary wall and followed the tradesman had for one moment endangered his success. When, however, he had explained to the boys in the Junior Eleven why he had acted thus, he grew more popular than he had ever been. Not only the boys in the Second Eleven, but every boy in the Junior School started to look for a man who wore two pink studs and one odd one.

A Pink Stud Club was formed. Lancelot was chosen as president of it, and John Raymond was secretary. The rule was that anyone who had any information whatsoever to give about pink studs should at once report to the Secretary.

The Head Master was always loath to grant week-end leave. But when Mr. Bolton wrote and asked him if his son Guy might come home for his sister's wedding on the following Saturday, the Head Master allowed that this was an exceptional occasion, and Guy had leave to go to London on the Saturday. The wedding was to take place on the following Monday.

The Boltons lived in South Kensington.

As the motors were very full, Guy and his cousin Fergus Bolton said they would walk to the church. Even in the excitement of his sister's wedding, he had not put the thought of the Pink Stud Club out of his mind. As he had left school on the previous day heads had bobbed out from various classrooms, shouting out after him:

"Perhaps you'll find him in London. Keep your eye open for pink studs!"

On the way to the church he told Fergus about the pink studs.

It was extraordinary, but no sooner had he told Fergus than Fergus said:

"Look—look. At that man over there. He's got pink studs. I saw his shirt front. Two pink studs and a black one."

Guy howled with laughter.

"Look here, old man. You think I'm going to be taken in, do you? So likely you'd see him the minute I told you the story."

But a second later Fergus convinced Guy he really was in earnest and that he had seen the man.

"Yes—but where is he now?" said Guy.

"He's across the road. Look," said Fergus. "Over

there. That's the one. Just gone past the woman with the basket."

He pointed out the disappearing back of a tall, well-made man. Guy just had time to see as he dipped into the crowd again that he was wearing a navy blue suit and a fawn squash hat.

"Quick, quick," said Guy. "Let's follow him."

He forgot all about his sister's wedding. He remembered nothing but the Pink Stud Club. Here would be something to report to Raymond. He did not see himself just reporting that he had spotted the man, or rather that Fergus had. He imagined the wonderful tale he would tell of how he had captured him in the streets of London.

But there was to be no capture in the streets of London. The boys were pursuing the man with the pink studs down the High Street. They got into a block. They could not catch him again, but they kept their eyes on him. They saw him turn down a street to the right. At last they managed to push their way through the crowd. They turned down the street to the right just in time to see the man being let into the third house on the left-hand side of the street. It was a quiet street, communicating with the square in which was the church where Guy's sister was to be married.

But whether they were near or far away from the church did not matter in the least to the boys. They had both forgotten the wedding.

"There, that was the house he went into," said Guy.

"Yes. The third one on the left," said Fergus.

It was a tall house set back from the road, and a tiny strip of garden, with an iron gate opening into it, separated it from the pavement.

The man, in banging the gate behind him, had wedged the bolt tightly into the socket. The boys had to push at it to get it open.

They fussed and grumbled at the thing sticking like this. Then something very unexpected happened.

THEY WERE BEING PUSHED INTO A CAR WHICH HAD DRAWN UP SO QUICKLY THAT THEY HAD NOT HEARD IT

The boys, panting and gasping, found themselves seized each by the collar from the back, and instead of pushing at the gate, they were being pushed into a car which had drawn up so quietly that they had not heard it.

When they had recovered from the surprise of this unexpected onslaught, they realized they were not being kidnapped because they had located the pink studs. They discovered themselves to be seated in their Uncle Charles's Rolls Royce, with a very angry Uncle Charles looking at them.

"Wherever have you been, I'd like to know?" he said. "What have you both been doing? When we got to the church we found there was not a sign of you there. And where are the wedding leaflets you were to hand out? Not one in the church."

For the first time Guy and Fergus remembered the leaflets which they were carrying, and which had become crushed and dirty while they were pushing at the gate.

"I am sorry," said Guy.

"We forgot about the wedding," said Fergus.

"You see," said Guy, "we saw a man with two pink studs and a black one, so we had to follow him."

"Two pink studs and a black one," snorted Uncle Charles. "The matter with you both is too much films."

They had now reached the church and could not explain any further. They were only just in time, for a minute later the bride herself arrived.

A wedding is rather a jolly affair, the boys decided. The eating part of it, anyhow. During the reception Guy and Fergus forgot about the man with the pink studs. It was great sport to see who could swallow the most ices in the shortest time.

Then there was the bride going away. Who would hit the bridegroom's hat with rice? Could they get a white shoe tied under the motor so that the happy pair could not see it until they had driven away?

But when all the festivities had come to an end, the man with the pink studs became a very important person once more.

There was to be a family dinner-party at eight o'clock. It was only seven now. The boys decided to go round to Marlowe Road, and make enquiries for this man.

Once again two small boys, immaculately turned out in wedding clothes and top hats, set out for the house. It was dark and the shops were shut, so the streets were not so crowded.

This time the gate at No. 3 Marlowe Road was open. They walked up the steps, and Fergus rang the bell. It was opened by a maid, a lodging-house-looking maid, for at No. 3 they let apartments.

"I say," said Guy, "I want the man who came here this afternoon. I don't know what his name is, but he's got two pink studs and a black one in his shirt."

The maid knew who they meant, because she had also noticed the studs.

"I want to see him," said Guy.

"It's awfully important," joined in Fergus.

"I'm afraid you can't do that," said the maid. "He only came here to see if he could get rooms, but we hadn't any."

They asked her many more questions. No, she could not tell them where he'd gone. He had not said—and he had not been before, but she had heard him say he would be back on Wednesday at three o'clock to see if there would, then, be any vacant rooms.

The boys were rather depressed as they walked back to Kensington Place. By Wednesday they would both have returned to their respective schools. They tried to think of any way by which they could avoid going back.

When the next morning came, Fergus had a cold and Guy had a headache. But the family decided it was not a very bad cold or a very bad headache, and the hard-hearted parents saw them off to school again.

Fergus had forgotten all about the episode of the pink

studs before he had gone very far on his journey, but then, of course, he was not a member of the Pink Stud Club.

That evening after supper, Guy walked importantly into the room where the Pink Stud Club was assembled. He marched up to the Secretary.

"I have something to report," he said.

The Secretary turned to the President.

"Bolton has come back from London," he said, "with something he wishes to report."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH

LANCELOT'S LETTER

It was Wednesday afternoon. The Art lecture was to take place at three o'clock.

"I never knew anything so lucky," said Molly after lunch, "as Mr. Andrews not being able to come, and Mr. MacRory taking his place."

Stephanie laughed gaily.

"Poor Mr. Andrews," she said. "That was just what he said in his letter. We should all be glad that he had an attack of influenza. But, of course, he didn't know," she added, "that I had such a special reason for being glad."

Molly and Stephanie had both put clean white collars on their school tunics to celebrate the occasion, and had brushed up their school hats.

They started off in good time for the lecture, but they had not gone far when Stephanie remembered that she had left her fountain pen on the dressing-room table, and she would want it to take notes at the lecture. She told Molly to go on, and that she would go back and get it.

It was just where she had thought it would be. She popped it into her attaché case, and was coming out of the house again, when the postman arrived.

There was only one letter. It was for Stephanie from Lancelot.

She put down her attache case on the step, and opened it. It was a very exciting letter, and the writing was rushing all over the place because Lancelot had written it in a great hurry.

It was a very long letter too, for he had written fully of Guy's adventures on the day of his sister's wedding.

But this was the great point. None of them could get up from school to London, but she was there, and as her school was in South Kensington, it would not be very far away. Would she go round to Marlowe Road the minute she got this letter, and enquire at No. 3 if the man with the pink studs had come back to get his rooms? And if he had not got them, where he had gone? They expected him to call again about half-past two on Wednesday afternoon.

Stephanie glanced at the clock. It was half-past two now.

The man with the pink studs seemed to throw an enchantment over all those who pursued him, and make them forget anything else they were going to do.

Just as the boys had forgotten the wedding on Saturday, Stephanie forgot the Art Lecture, and that Molly was waiting for her at the entrance to the school.

She picked up her attaché case, and began to run in the opposite direction to that in which the school lay. She reached Marlowe Road and rang the bell at No. 3.

She had not made any plan as to what she would do when she saw him. She just wanted to see him and make sure of the studs. Then perhaps she would tell a policeman outside.

The maid opened the door.

"I want to see the gentleman who is coming back at three o'clock to-day to see if he can get some rooms here."

"I am sorry," said the maid, "but he's been and gone. He came at half-past two. The mistress could not oblige him, seeing as how the family that's been here several months has decided to stop on a week or two."

"Oh, dear," said Stephanie, feeling downcast. "I suppose you don't know where he's gone?" she said.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do," said the maid. "I told him Mrs. Fernie round the corner let rooms, so he told the taxi man to take him there."

Before Stephanie had time to say she would go to Mrs. Fernie's, the maid was pointing to a taxi-cab which had pulled up at the stand facing the house.

"There's the man that took him," she said. "We'll ask him if he got in at Mrs. Fernie's."

She beckoned to the driver, who came and leant over the iron gate to talk to them.

"No, Mrs. Fernie couldn't oblige the gentleman."

"You don't happen to know where he went after that?" asked Stephanie.

"He told me to drive him to the Belmont School."

"What," Stephanie nearly screamed. "My school. The school in South Kensington Place?"

"That's it, Miss."

"Why's he gone there?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say. He didn't tell me."

Stephanie ran down the steps and past the taxi driver, who was still leaning over the iron railings.

She could not think why he had gone to her school, he would not go there to get rooms! She must get there before he got away again. If only she could find him there, it would be splendid. As she ran down the road, she thought of all the reasons that might have taken him to Belmont School. Perhaps he had gone to steal the presentation clock in Miss Talbot's boudoir. He would say he was the clock man come to wind the clock. She had heard of that trick being played before.

Perhaps he meant to steal the silver cup out of the music room. Then he would say he was the piano tuner.

She ran as fast as she could down the road and across the square.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-NINTH

THE ART LECTURE

Molly had waited as she promised outside the school door. It was now a quarter to three. She had been waiting twenty-five minutes for Stephanie. She began to feel worried. Could Stephanie have gone in by the East door? It was funny of her to have done that. This was the door by which she always entered. Still, it looked as though there must have been some mistake. She could not have been all that time fetching her fountain pen.

Viola came up at this moment, and found Molly waiting.

"Hullo, what are you doing here?" she said.

"Waiting for Stephanie."

Viola laughed rudely.

"If I'd been you, I should have brought her along with you."

"What do you mean?" asked Molly. Then she realized. "Oh, I know. You're trying to make out Stephanie is not coming. That she's afraid to meet Mr. MacRory."

Viola smiled, and walked past Molly into the school.

Molly waited another ten minutes. Stephanie really must have gone in another way. Molly decided she would go in now and see if she was there.

The cloak-room was full of girls. She could not see Stephanie among them. She saw Viola, and there was a little crowd round her.

When Viola saw Molly come in, she called out:

"Well, has Stephanie arrived yet?"

"Isn't she here?" asked Molly.

"No, she's not," said Viola.

"Funny of her to be so late," sneered Olive.

"It looks as though she's not coming," said Betty.

Instead of walking into the big hall with Molly, as they had done recently, they walked in with Viola.

Molly was getting frantic. There was no doubt about it,

Stephanie was not there. No coat and hat hung on her peg. Had she been taken ill? Or what had happened to her? Whether she was late or not for the lecture, it could not be helped. She had got to find out what had happened to Stephanie.

She had taken off her hat when she had come into the cloak-room. She put it on again, and went out of the school. She hurried back to the flat. She rang the bell.

Aunt Mary opened the door.

"Oh, Mummie," she said, "where's Stephanie?"

"My dear, she's gone long ago," said Aunt Mary. "Why, you went together. I saw you start for the lecture."

"But she came back for her pen."

"Yes, of course she did. But she was off again almost as soon as she got into the house."

"I must have missed her somewhere," said Molly, getting really worried.

"Yes, that's what you have done. And Stephanie's listening to the lecture, and you're missing it all. Now run along quickly, or you'll be late as usual."

Molly was inclined to be dilatory, and this was a great trouble to Aunt Mary.

Poor Molly was not easy in her mind. She was troubled as she walked back slowly to the school. If Stephanie had dashed out of the house again almost as soon as she had returned to it, and come straight back to school, she must have overtaken her, for Molly had been walking very slowly. It looked as though she had not come straight back. Why hadn't she? She had told Molly that morning that she was looking forward to seeing Mr. MacRory more than anything else, since she had known he was coming.

Horrid little doubts began to creep into her mind. Yes. It did look like it. She did not really wonder at the other girls thinking it. It really did seem as though Stephanie were trying to avoid meeting Mr. MacRory.

Then loyal Molly grew angry with herself.

There was some reason. Something she did not under-

stand from Stephanie's strange behaviour. She would not doubt her. She would believe her until Stephanie herself told her that she had deliberately avoided Mr. MacRory.

There was no one in the cloak-room when Molly went back again to hang up her coat and hat.

In the corridor she met Miss Allen, the Science Mistress.

"Hurry up, Molly," she said. "You're very late."

"Has the lecture begun yet?" asked Molly, for it was now a quarter past three.

"Not yet," said Miss Allen. "Mr. MacRory's here, but he stopped to talk to Miss Talbot in the boudoir. So if you're very quick, you'll just get there in time."

Molly pushed open the door of the big hall. It was crammed with girls. The seats allotted to her form and Stephanie's were on the further side of the hall. She glanced along the line of chairs. There were two empty ones. Hers and Stephanie's. How she hated joining the girls. She was afraid of what they would say to her. When she sat down in one of the two empty chairs, she felt that they were thinking the worst.

They had all gone over to Viola's side again. They had made up their minds, or rather Viola had made them up for them, that Stephanie had deliberately kept away because there was not a word of truth in what Mr. MacRory had said about her drawing; indeed, as Viola suggested, they were doubtful if she had ever met Mr. MacRory. No wonder, if that was the case, that she kept away; it would be very awkward when Mr. MacRory came into the room if he did not notice the protégée in whose work, according to Stephanie, he took so keen an interest.

Faith Brown, who sat next to Molly, took care to impart to her this latest idea.

"We don't believe she knows Mr. MacRory at all. We don't believe Mr. MacRory has ever heard of Stephanie."

The platform was approached by a small door on the right, while the main hall was reached by folding doors at the back of the room. The door on the right of the plat-

form began to open. There was a stir of excitement in the hall, as Miss Talbot came on to the platform, followed by Mr. MacRory.

These were the remarks that went flying through the hall.

"Isn't he nice?"

"And his hair isn't long."

"But you'd know he was an artist, wouldn't you, because of his tie?"

The whole school was fascinated by the artist's tie. It was made of strawberry-coloured silk, with long ends.

Miss Talbot came to the front of the platform.

"It's a great pleasure to us to have Mr. MacRory here this afternoon, and before he begins to speak to you, he would like to say how d'you do to his protégée. Will Stephanie Carlyon come up here for a moment?"

Molly's heart leapt. She looked at the girls in triumph.

Ah! There was no doubt now as to whether Stephanie had made up the story or not. Here was Mr. MacRory asking for her in front of the whole school.

But why wasn't Stephanie there?

She could not be absent because she was afraid of meeting him. Then the door at the back of the hall opened, and Stephanie came in.

Mr. MacRory saw her.

"Ah, there's Stephanie," he said.

"Come here, Stephanie," said Miss Talbot.

It seemed at first as though Stephanie had not heard. She was looking round the hall in a dazed way.

Her mind was set on one thing only, finding the man with the pink studs. There was no man in the room. Only the one on the platform. And that was Mr. MacRory.

Then she became aware that Miss Talbot was calling her up to the platform. As she walked through lines of girls, she remembered the importance of the afternoon. For a moment she forgot her search for the man with the pink studs.

She felt very shy as she walked on to the platform, but

Mr. MacRory had such a nice friendly manner that she could not really feel timid with him. He shook her by the hand, and said quite loudly so that all the school could hear:

"Well, lassie, do you know why I've come here to-day? To see you. I daresay all these girl friends of yours can't see anything in your work at present. That's just where the difference comes between them and me."

The mistresses looked at each other. That was what they had suspected. There was something in Stephanie's work that they had not been clever enough to see. Mr. MacRory shook hands with her again, and she went to take her seat with her form.

When Stephanie sat down, the attitude of the girls changed towards her. They were only afraid now that Molly might tell her what they had been saying.

"Fancy Mr. MacRory speaking like that to you," said Faith. "Doesn't it make you feel you are going to be a tremendously great artist?"

But Stephanie shook her head.

"No," she said. "I always feel he is mistaken. I don't believe I ever shall draw really well."

Then the lecture began.

Again Stephanie's thoughts went back to the man with the pink studs.

The girls were laughing. She did not know what they were laughing at. She was wondering how she could get out of the hall to look for him.

They had never expected Mr. MacRory to be such a jolly lecturer. He scarcely talked about Art at all, but told them all sorts of interesting stories about famous men of the day.

Then he said to them:

"Did you ever hear how Millais was asked to draw a pig with his eyes shut? And you'd think, wouldn't you, that he'd draw the most beautiful pig? Well, he didn't. This was what the wee piggy that Millais drew looked like."

He went to the blackboard at the side, and taking a piece

of chalk, drew a pig, that looked like a box with four legs stuck on it.

Every face was craning towards the blackboard.

He added a curly tail to the pig.

"Oh no," he said, "that won't do. That tail is too good."

To the amusement of the school, he took up the ends of that lovely pink silk tie and began to rub out the pig. Underneath the tie he was wearing a soft white shirt.

Stephanie's eyes were not fixed on the blackboard. They were fixed on his shirt front.

Two pink studs—and one black one!

She sat staring at the studs.

The maid was making her way up the room. Mr. MacRory was wiping off the pig with his silk tie, as the maid was speaking to Miss Talbot.

"There's a gentleman come," she said, "and he says he's Mr. MacRory."

"But Mr. MacRory's here," said Miss Talbot, indicating the artist on the platform.

"He says this one's an impostor. Won't you speak to the other gentleman?" the maid persisted. "He's waiting outside in the corridor."

She indicated the corridor beyond the swing doors.

Miss Talbot looked a little uneasy. Stephanie was almost getting up in her chair. She felt she ought to do something, but what? Mr. MacRory, the great artist, could not have taken the tapestry. Yet it was extraordinary how thoughts were rushing through her head. He was one of the few people who had known where it was hidden.

At that moment the door at the bottom of the hall was flung open, flung open so violently that every head in the room turned to see what was taking place.

Standing in the doorway was a tall, dark man, not unlike the artist with the pink tie, although he wore no strawberry bow, but a neat black tie.

"Where is he? Where is he? This fraud who is lecturing to you?"

Every eye turned back to the platform. There was nobody on the platform. The lecturer had vanished.

Miss Talbot went down the room to the new arrival, and he began to speak to her so loudly and indignantly that all the school could hear.

Now every head turned again to hear what he was saying.

"I wouldn't have known it if I had not found a paragraph in the paper."

He read out the paragraph:

"'Mr. David MacRory, the famous artist, has kindly consented to lecture to the girls at Belmont School, South Kensington, this afternoon.' I never did any such thing! I never made any such promise! And I come here to find out what is happening, and the maid tells me Mr. David MacRory, the artist, is lecturing to the lassies in the hall. Whoever has been lecturing to you is nothing but an impostor. I am David MacRory."

CHAPTER THE THIRTIETH

IN THE LIBRARY

The Art lecture came to an abrupt end. Miss Talbot took Mr. MacRory into the library, which was opposite the big hall. She closed the door after them. Tongues were wagging in the big hall. Then Miss Graham, the Senior English Mistress, stood up and knocked on the table.

"Will each Form go to its class-room?" she said. "And kindly file quietly down the passage."

Stephanie was thinking—thinking. In the form room she began to talk. She was usually rather quiet, and the girls had never heard her rush on like this before.

"I know now I never could draw," she said. "I ought never to have thought I could. But then Mr. MacRory, who doesn't seem to be Mr. MacRory any more, told me that I showed promise, I could not help, of course, believing

him. But it's terribly humiliating now"—poor Stephanie put her hands over her eyes—"to find what a dreadful fool he's made of me."

Then Viola behaved decently. For the first time she felt pity for Stephanie.

"I've been horrible to you," she said. "And I'm sorry. You see, your drawings were not very good—I mean, not all that good," poor Viola stumbled. "And I was jealous of you. So I said Mr. MacRory never praised you."

"Nor did he," said Stephanie, "not the real Mr. MacRory—the one that counts."

"But you believed he had," Viola went on. "You did not tell us anything that you did not believe had happened. Indeed," she added, "to give you your absolute due, you never really boasted. It was Molly who told us all about it.'

"Yes, it's jolly hard lines," said Faith, "being had like that."

"To be made to believe," said Kathleen, "you are going to be a genius, when you're not."

The girls were so nice to her that Stephanie was tearful. She might have been weak enough to burst into tears, if the door had not opened that moment and one of the junior girls poked in her head to say would Stephanie go at once to Miss Talbot in the library.

Mr. MacRory—the real Mr. MacRory—was sitting in the armchair by the fireplace. Miss Talbot was by the table in the window. She was very nice to Stephanie. She held out her hand to her, while she asked her to tell them everything she knew about this other Mr. MacRory.

Ever since Stephanie had seen the pink studs, and learnt on top of this discovery that the lecturer was an impostor, she had been piecing things together.

Her story surprised both of them. When she had finished it, she said:

"I know for certain now that it was he who stole the tapestry from under Lancelot's floor. I can see everything so clearly. He read in the paper that the tapestry had been

left to Mummie. He came to Combe to get it. He saw me sketching, and thought that if he made friends with me it would be the easiest way of getting into our house to see where 'Stephanie's Knight Errant' was hanging. He thought if he made out he was a big artist, I should be so flattered. And I was," said Stephanie. And again her lips trembled.

"Nobody could blame you," said Miss Talbot. Then she was kinder than ever. "If you are never going to be a great artist," she said, "you're going to be something else. You're going to be a great scholar."

She turned to Mr. MacRory and said something that made Stephanie very proud:

"Stephanie is not the least bit conceited, and I know it will not harm her to tell her what I think her to be, that is, the cleverest girl in the school."

Mr. MacRory smiled. Quite a nice smile; although he was not really half so attractive or jolly as the other Mr. MacRory, Stephanie decided. All the same he was a little like him. Both their voices suggested they were of Scotch origin. They each talked of "wee" and "lassie."

Poor Stephanie, that was one of the things that made it so hard for her. She had really liked the make-believe Mr. MacRory, and she could scarcely bear to think he was a scoundrel.

"Granted," said Mr. MacRory, for he was really more interested in this part of the story than in Stephanie's progress, "that this man impersonated me in order to steal the tapestry, that does not still explain why he should have impersonated me here again to-day. Because there are no tapestries here to steal."

"No," said Stephanie. "There's a valuable clock in the boudoir. I expect he got into the school to steal that, and the silver cups from the music room."

It seemed possible that Stephanie's idea was correct. It was likely that when he had rushed out of the hall and they had been absorbed in the arrival of the second Mr. Mac-

Rory, he had slipped into the music room and the boudoir, and had escaped with the school presentations.

"Let's go and look," said Stephanie.

She rushed towards the door. Miss Talbot followed her, and Mr. MacRory followed Miss Talbot.

Then she remembered her manners, and stepped forward for Miss Talbot to go first.

But Miss Talbot said:

"You run on, dear, and see."

So Stephanie ran ahead of the others along the corridor to the music room. She flung open the door, and stood looking into the room. Miss Talbot and Mr. MacRory came up behind her.

The cups were safe. There was not one missing from the shining row on the mantelpiece. They went from the music room across to the boudoir. He had not taken the clock.

Then Stephanie felt very glad. She was not only glad that the cups and the clock were safe, but glad that Mr. MacRory had not been mean enough to take away the school property. She could not help it. She still liked him.

When Molly was telling Aunt Mary the story that night, she found herself saying:

"Perhaps he had never stolen anything before. Perhaps he did not like stealing. Perhaps he was in dreadful straits. He's got such a nice face, I think there must be some good reason why he did it."

Aunt Mary was quite cross with her.

"Stephanie," she said, "I'm surprised at you. There's no excuse whatsoever for a man who commits a theft."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIRST

A SURPRISE VISITOR

The term finished uneventfully—uneventfully inasmuch as the middle of it had been filled with such excitement, but perhaps not uneventfully when one considers that Stephanie took everything before her. Although she had only gone back at half-term, she came out top in the exams, but then, of course, she had taken a great deal of pains to work up the material she had missed.

Indeed Aunt Mary had been worried that she had been working too hard. She had seen her electric light burning sometimes as late as half-past twelve. But, as she explained to Aunt Mary, when you had had a dreadful disappointment, as she had, and not only she alone, but her mother as well, you must make good in another way. If she was not going to be a successful art student she would try and be a brilliant scholar. Miss Talbot had fired her ambition.

So when she went home for the holidays with a boxful of prizes, Mrs. Carlyon was delighted, and very pleased with her report, since it not only told her that Stephanie showed great promise for the future, but that she was a really good influence in the school, and that she had a lovable disposition.

One of the things that pleased Stephanie more than anything else was the fact that Viola no longer seemed to be jealous of her. Her friendly behaviour made Stephanie feel much happier, and she went home to Combe full of devotion to her school.

Many things tended to make those holidays very happy ones for Stephanie.

Mrs. Carlyon had no longer any anxiety as to how to meet the insurance claim, for when Mr. Green's possessions had been finally investigated, sewn inside the lining of one of his waistcoats had been found six hundred pounds in notes. He owned that this was the money drawn from the bank against Mrs. Carlyon's cheque. So, after some weeks

of formalities had been undergone, the money had eventually been returned to her, and she had forwarded it to the insurance company. This cleared Lancelot from responsibility, and Mr. Bennett was no longer obliged to sell his house. Following the payment of the money, Sir Bertram himself had been to see Mrs. Carlyon, and had told her how glad he was it had all been settled so satisfactorily, and how much he regretted that he should have had to treat her, as it must have seemed to her, so unkindly.

"But then, of course," he excused himself now, "when you're responsible for a big company, you know—and—and—there were the other directors."

Mrs. Carlyon had smiled forgivingly and asked him to stay to tea. Next morning a beautiful bunch of carnations arrived instead of the peaches—now out of season—which he had once offered Stephanie. With the flowers came a little note, saying that now her luck seemed to be turning, he hoped one day she would get her tapestry back again.

This did not seem very likely, as nothing had been heard of the make-believe Mr. MacRory since he had disappeared from the platform in the school hall in the middle of the Art lecture.

Another thing that made the holidays happy ones for Stephanie was the fact that Lancelot spent a week at Combe Cottage.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennett had been obliged to go and stay with Mrs. Bennett's mother, who was in poor health. One might be sure that nothing but her mother's poor health would have taken Mrs. Bennett from Lancelot in the holidays. So Mrs. Carlyon had invited Lancelot to stay with Stephanie and herself.

His arrival had been preceded by a visit from Mrs. Bennett. She had come full of questions and requests. Had Mrs. Carlyon a First Aid box, because, if not, she would bring hers over. And did the bed in which he would sleep lie North and South, because she had heard it was injurious to the eyesight for the bed to face East. Would Mrs.

Carlyon be sure to see that Lancelot did not take too hot a bath, for he was given to boiling himself like a lobster, and it was most unsafe.

Both Lancelot and Stephanie were very sorry when the week was drawing to an end. The day before Lancelot was to return home he had a letter from his mother, saying that his grandmother was not so well, and that she wondered if Mrs. Carlyon would be kind enough to keep him for a few days longer.

Mrs. Carlyon was delighted, and Stephanie, of course, was overjoyed.

The next post brought another letter. Would he go over to Oaklands immediately on receipt of it, and find his father's Jaeger coat, and post it to him? Mrs. Carlyon was taking Stephanie to the dressmaker to be fitted for a new frock to go back to school, so Lancelot went alone to Oaklands.

The house had been locked up, but the key was with the postmaster, whose wife went in every other day to air the rooms. Mr. Gambol fetched it out of the drawer, and gave it to Lancelot.

Oaklands was only a few minutes' walk from the post office. Lancelot pushed open the gate.

The trees that grew on each side of the drive were overgrown, so that the quaint old house could not be seen until the bend of the drive was reached. Of course, Lancelot did not look at the house; one does not look at the house one has lived in all one's life. But he did look at something else. To be accurate, it was not something, but somebody.

Standing on the doorstep, ringing the bell, was Mr. MacRory—the impostor Mr. MacRory. He turned and saw Lancelot! He did not run away. He stood smiling there—beckoning to Lancelot.

"I was afraid there was no one at home," he said, "and I particularly want to get into the house. Ah! I see you've got the key."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SECOND

EXPLANATIONS

Now, considering that Lancelot had met Mr. MacRory on the doorstep of Oaklands, it was rather surprising that when he returned to Combe Cottage he never mentioned that he had so much as seen him.

It was yet more surprising at supper, for Mrs. Carlyon actually said she wondered whether they would ever hear or see anything of Mr. MacRory again.

They played double patience after supper. Lancelot was absent-minded. He kept doing silly things, and Stephanie said:

"Well, if you are not interested in the game, we'd better play something else."

The young people almost squabbled, and Mrs. Carlyon decided they were over-tired, and she suggested that they should go to bed early.

Lancelot had been odd enough overnight; he was odder still at breakfast in the morning.

He kept saying: "Did you hear anything in the night?"

And when Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie answered that they had both slept too soundly to hear anything, he was quite grumbly, and said he didn't wonder people had their houses broken into when people slept so well.

Stephanie said that was a very silly thing to say, because they had never had their house broken into, and Lancelot added:

"You don't know what might not have happened last night. You haven't been into the drawing-room to see."

Stephanie told Lancelot he was very stupid. If anybody had broken into the drawing-room Ellen would have seen when she went in to dust before breakfast.

After breakfast Lancelot asked Stephanie if she had left her book in the drawing-room. When she said she had not

done so, he asked her if she would get him a footstool out of the drawing-room.

And Stephanie said: "Why ever should you want a footstool? If you do, there's one under the table here."

But he said he liked the one in the drawing-room best.

She said she could not make out what he was worrying about. Why did he keep trying to get her into the drawing-room? Whereupon he retorted he did not care if she went into the drawing-room or not. She need never go into the drawing-room again in her life, for all he minded.

Mrs. Carlyon was afraid they were going to start the day with a quarrel. She saw that for some reason or another Lancelot did want Stephanie to go into the drawing-room, and Stephanie was feeling obstinate about it, and did not mean to go.

So a few moments later she said, just as though she was making a chance remark: "I want to change the flowers in the drawing-room. Which of you will come and clear away the vases?"

Immediately they both offered.

So when Lancelot threw open the drawing-room door, not only Stephanie but Mrs. Carlyon saw something hanging on the drawing-room wall which for the moment left them speechless.

It was the tapestry back again.

Stephanie turned to Lancelot.

"You knew it was there. You knew it. That is why you wanted me to come into the drawing-room."

She heard a step in the passage. Ellen had come up behind them.

"Ellen, you knew it was back," said Stephanie. "You must have seen it. Why didn't you tell us?"

Ellen was giggling.

"It was Master Lancelot's surprise. He asked me not to say."

Then the door-bell rang. Ellen went to answer it.

"But, Lancelot," said Mrs. Carlyon, "how did it come back?"

"You'll hear all about it soon," said Lancelot, whose face was scarlet with excitement.

"I can't understand. I can't understand," said Stephanie. "What can have happened?"

"Isn't it wonderful to see it hanging there," said Mrs. Carlyon, "just as though it had never gone away?"

Then Ellen came back into the room.

"There are two gentlemen to see you, ma'am. Shall I show them in here?"

"Who are they?" said Mrs. Carlyon.

"The two Mr. David MacRorys."

"What?"

"It's the most extraordinary morning," gasped Stephanie.

Lancelot just laughed again. Nothing was a surprise to him, because he was in the secret.

"Mr. David MacRory and Mr. David MacRory," Ellen announced.

Into the room came Mr. David MacRory the artist, and Mr. David MacRory the fraud.

It was a strange morning, and the strangest thing about it all was that the two Mr. MacRorys seemed on the best of terms with each other. Neither Mrs. Carlyon nor Stephanie could grasp the position. Why had Mr. David MacRory brought the other Mr. David MacRory? How was it that the tapestry was back on the wall? And what did Lancelot know about it all?

Then Mrs. Carlyon said: "It seems beyond guessing. Won't you sit down and tell us what has happened?"

"My cousin was responsible for the trouble," said the artist, "so he had better do the talking."

"Your cousin!" gasped Stephanie.

"Yes, that rogue there is my cousin." But the way he spoke the word rogue did not sound as though he really thought he was a rogue. "First of all, I want you to rid yourselves of one thought. He never took the tapestry.

Unless you get rid of that idea, you won't enjoy what he has to say."

"Then who did take the tapestry?" said Stephanie.

"No, I am not going to tell you anything yet, or I shall spoil his story."

Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie sat down on the sofa. Lancelot perched himself on the end of it. The artist took the chair in the window and the story-teller stood on the hearth-rug.

"First of all," he said, "I want to tell you I never assumed my cousin's name. We are both David MacRorys. He was the good one of the family. I was the bad one."

"Not the bad one," said Mr. David MacRory. "He just loved pranks. And never grew up!"

"So when I found you sketching in the field"—David MacRory was talking to Stephanie now—"and I told you I was David MacRory, and you were so excited, I said: 'Let her be excited.' I never guessed all the trouble that would come out of it, or I should have put things right at once. So I let you bring me to your home. When I saw how pleased your mother was, I hadn't the heart to tell her I was not The David MacRory, but just 'the other David MacRory.' You see, I never said I was the artist. You just jumped to that conclusion.

"When Lancelot came to tell me that, on the strength of my praise, you had gone to school to study art, and, worse still, about the insurance money, I began to feel anxious. So that's why I told him to own up."

"But why did you write me that letter?" said Stephanie.

Then "The Other" David MacRory smiled that nice smile of his which had made Stephanie like him so much.

"I suppose I'm a weak kind of fool," he said. "I always was. But I felt it was so rough on you, I mean the lassies not believing that David MacRory had told you you could draw. For David MacRory had said it in so far as I, too, am David MacRory. So I just wrote and said I had."

"But what made you come and lecture at our school?" Stephanie asked next.

Again David MacRory smiled.

"I was a weak fool once more. I heard from Lancelot that the lassies still would not believe you, that they said David MacRory never had written you that letter. A friend of mine knew Mr. Andrews, who was lecturing at your school. So when I heard he was out of action, I said I would take his place. I did not suppose your school would ever see my cousin.

"It amused me to think of myself delivering an art lecture. I—who haven't an ounce of art inside me. I love a lark. That's why I wore a pink tie. Cousin David would never have worn a pink tie. He thinks they're dreadful."

The mention of the words "pink tie" brought back the remembrance of the pink studs to Stephanie.

"Two pink studs and a black one," she said. "We made up our minds that the man with the odd studs had stolen the tapestry."

"Lots of people make up their minds that lots of people have done things they haven't," said the other Mr. MacRory.

And then came the most exciting part of the story, that held them enthralled, because it was all new to them.

"I can't help it," said Mr. Pink Studs—for this was what Stephanie called him to distinguish him from his cousin—"but the fairies who came to my christening gave me a disposition that loves a joke. When Cousin David was announced, I was not afraid to meet him, but I thought what a joke it would be to vanish as though I had never existed. So when you all turned round, I slipped out of the door on the right of the platform, and, well—vanished.

"I'd been meaning to stay in London for a bit, but as I couldn't get into any of the rooms I wanted, I decided to run over to Paris. I often wondered what had happened after the dramatic appearance of the real Mr. MacRory. When I came back to London two days ago, I looked up Cousin David at his flat, and told him the Impostor, as he

called him, was none other than myself, which seemed for the moment to disconcert him. It was then I discovered that to me had been attributed the theft of 'Stephanie's Knight Errant.' This was somewhat disconcerting. Cousin David told me the whole story. It was then I had an idea as to what might have become of it.

"I told Lancelot that evening I went to see him at his house," Mr. Pink Studs continued, "that once long ago some friends of mine had actually lived in his house. I was quite a boy at the time, but it was because I remembered them telling me how pretty the country round Combe was that I came down here for a holiday.

"It was not, however, until after I had heard of the mysterious disappearance of the tapestry from under Lancelot's floor, that I remembered something else.

"It was yesterday afternoon that Lancelot and I met on the doorstep." Then he looked at the excited Lancelot. "All right, old man, you tell if you like. I retire in your favour." And he leaned back in the arm-chair.

"Of course," Lancelot rushed on, "directly I saw Mr. MacRory I thought I had caught the thief. And I told him so. 'I know you've got it. Give it to us back.'"

"I've never known anything so lion-hearted as Lancelot," said Mr. Pink Studs. "Attacked me for the theft. When you look at him and then look at me—with no one else near—I could not help admiring his pluck."

Even such praise as this could not stop Lancelot's tongue for a second.

"And he said he hadn't. And he'd come down to prove he hadn't."

"But I can't think," said Stephanie, "who could have taken it, and still more, how it could have got back here."

"You're going to know in a minute," said Lancelot. "When Mr. Pink Studs' friends had our house, he remembered them telling him that it was really a very old house, and that there was a double floor in one of the bedrooms. So, after he had seen the other Mr. MacRory, he went to

find his friends. They described the floor to him, and where the spring that worked it could be found.

"It was my floor," Lancelot rushed on. "We suppose that, last time I looked to see if the tapestry was safe, in hammering back the boards I must have accidentally touched the spring which opened the second floor, and so the roll of needle-work must have slid through it, and the floor closed up automatically again. Because we found the spring, and it was close to one of the nails I had hammered in to keep the boards down. It was most exciting. We took up the top boards, and then we pressed the spring and the boards parted, and there was the tapestry. Then gradually they closed again."

"Oh, how gorgeous!" said Stephanie.

"I've heard of double floors and ceilings in houses before," said Mrs. Carlyon, "but I never knew there was one at Oaklands."

Lancelot was anxious they should go back there and then and see it.

"But we still don't know," said Stephanie, "who put the tapestry back on the wall."

Mr. Pink Studs laughed.

"Lancelot and I put our heads together and thought what a joke it would be to hang it back in its place, and give you the surprise of your lives in the morning. So last night, when you were both asleep"—he smiled at Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie—"Lancelot came here. Once again the drawing-room window played a part in the story. I handed it to Lancelot through the drawing-room window and he hung it back in its place on the wall."

It was not until they had been to Oaklands and investigated the exciting floor for themselves, in fact, until both Mr. MacRorys were having lunch at Combe Cottage, that Stephanie said:

"But—but the pink stud we thought was such a valuable clue?"

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. MacRory, "I dropped

the pink stud on my first visit to this house. When I got back that night to the farm I found it missing, and as I hadn't got another, Farmer Lang most kindly obliged me with this black one, and I have worn the two pink ones and this black one ever since."

Before the Mr. MacRorys returned to town that night, Mr. Pink Stud MacRory came and spoke to Mrs. Carlyon.

"I feel you have all been very kind to me," he said. "And I assure you I had no idea into what trouble my silly prank would have led you all. And I want," he said, "if I can, to do something for you and Stephanie. I understand that you wish to sell your tapestry, and that Colonel Ellis has offered to pay £500 for it. Now I have been looking at 'Stephanie's Knight Errant' and I have an idea that it is worth a great deal more than anyone suspects. If you will trust it off your wall for a day or two," he said, and he smiled at Mrs. Carlyon, "I would like to take it to London and have it valued. Should it be as rare a piece of needlework as I suspect, might I arrange, if you really wish to sell it, to have it put up to auction in the best possible way?"

Mrs. Carlyon told Mr. Pink Studs that she would indeed be grateful to him, for, as she explained, her means were very slender, and there was Stephanie's future to consider, so if the tapestry really sold for a big price it would make a great difference to them both.

"But you haven't said you forgive me yet," said Mr. Pink Studs.

He had such a real charm of manner, and he was so very sorry, just like a schoolboy who has been naughty and is truly repentant, that Mrs. Carlyon held out both her hands to him and said:

"I couldn't help forgiving you. After all, if it had not been for you in the first place, Stephanie might never have been sent to school."

He was more like a schoolboy a fortnight later.

It was the evening of the auction, and the night before

Stephanie went back to school. Mrs. Carlyon and Stephanie were in the drawing-room, and Lancelot was there as well.

Mr. Pink Studs came bounding into the room. He wrung them all by hand, thumped Lancelot on the back, twirled Stephanie round and round, then he sat beside the table, and thumped on it with his fist.

"Going—going—going—£250—£300—£450—£600——" He was taking off the auction sale. "£1,000—£1,300."

"No—no," said Mrs. Carlyon. "That's another of your jokes. It never fetched that figure."

"No, it didn't," said Mr. MacRory.

Stephanie's face fell.

"Don't joke," she said. "Tell us the truth. Was it less than £500? Less than Colonel Ellis offered?"

"It went for—£2,400," said Mr. Pink Studs.

"You're joking again," said Mrs. Carlyon.

"I'm not," said Mr. MacRory. "That's the absolute truth."

"But Colonel Ellis said he was not sure if it really was worth £500," put in Mrs. Carlyon. "He said that he thought perhaps £450 would be enough to pay for it. But he would stretch the point to £500 to oblige me."

Mr. Pink Studs was enjoying a huge joke to himself.

"And who do you think bought it?" he said.

They all shook their heads.

"Colonel Ellis. And I heard him say as he left the auction room, he thought he'd got a bargain, for he fully believed 'Stephanie's Knight Errant' to be worth £3,000."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-THIRD

EPILOGUE

ONE day in the summer term a tall, fine-looking boy in flannels met down by the river at Oxford a charming-looking girl of eighteen.

"I've got the skiff all ready, Steph."

"It's a jolly evening, isn't it, Lance?" she said, as he handed her into the boat, and he took the oars and rowed her up the river.

He was at Magdalen, and she was at Lady Margaret Hall.

In the years that had passed since those exciting holidays, in which the tapestry had been returned and sold to such advantage, the two friends had made strides forward.

Lancelot had developed into a first-class athlete. He was expecting any day to get his Blue. Stephanie had taken a scholarship at Lady Margaret Hall. Miss Talbot had told a very proud mother that Stephanie was the cleverest girl who had ever been at the High School. Just as Mrs. Carlyon was delighted with Stephanie's brilliance, so Mr. Bennett was overjoyed with Lancelot's success in sport. It was not only Mr. Bennett who was proud. Grandfather Bennett was delighted. He had once been a Blue himself, so when he had heard that Lancelot was developing in the same line himself, it was he who had undertaken to send Lancelot to Oxford. Only Mrs. Bennett was rather worried lest he should fall into the water, and she hoped he would tell all the others in the boat not to wriggle in case they should upset it.

It was a lovely evening. The sunlight was glinting on the river. They moored under some trees. Stephanie leant forward, with her arms curled round her knees.

"And you think you are sure to get your Blue?" she said.

"Pretty certain," said Lancelot.

"You know," she said, "I can hardly realize now what a funny little boy you once were. Were you really a coward, Lancelot, when you were small?"

"A fearful coward," said Lancelot. "At least until that night when I wanted so badly to be your knight. And when I made that awful howler over the tapestry."

"But you made up your mind to be brave, and you grew brave."

"Yes," said Lancelot. "But think of the damage I might have done. I nearly ruined your mother."

"And yet, if you hadn't taken the tapestry," said Stephanie, still thinking deeply, "we should never have got the insurance money, and I should never have gone to school. And if I hadn't gone to school—well, I shouldn't have had the chance, should I, of winning anything so glorious as a scholarship for Oxford? So you see, Lancelot, I owe all my success to you."

"I know," said Lancelot, "but it does not seem quite right. We've both got on in the world because I did something years and years ago which was a very wrong thing to have done."

"Yes. But don't you see," said Stephanie, "you didn't know it was wrong? You thought it was right. And I don't believe it matters so much what you do, so long as you think it 's right. So I expect," she said, "that's why we've both been allowed to grow up to be successful. It was all because you made an effort long ago to do something for someone you loved. I fancy the things you do for the people you love come out right in the end."

And it all came out very right for them. He got his Blue. And she got a First-Class.

They were both very pleased. But they were both as modest as ever.

Then one day they married.

How could it be otherwise? For he was her Knight, and she was his Ladye.

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